

Every shade of you

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/16400498) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/16400498>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/M, M/M, Multi
Fandom:	Marvel Cinematic Universe , The Avengers (Marvel Movies) , The Avengers (Marvel) - All Media Types , Doctor Strange (2016)
Relationship:	Loki/Stephen Strange , Christine Palmer/Stephen Strange
Character:	Stephen Strange , Loki (Marvel) , Christine Palmer
Additional Tags:	Canon Divergence - Avengers (2012) , Chitauri invasion , Memory Loss , Getting to Know Each Other , Implied/Referenced Torture , Eventual Romance , new identity , First Dates , Falling In Love
Stats:	Published: 2018-10-24 Completed: 2018-12-28 Chapters: 10/10 Words: 34997

Every shade of you

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Summary

As a doctor Stephen has seen both amazing and horrid things. An alien invasion right in the middle of Manhattan belongs into the second category.

The strange green-eyed guy who ends up in his hospital with signs of severe physical trauma and an even worse case of amnesia... Stephen doesn't really know in which category he should put him.

Stephen needs a third category, because the stranger is extraordinary.

Notes

Hello everybody,

The world needs more Doctor Strange / Loki fanfic :D

It's probably too soon to post this, but I wanted to know if you could be interested in this little piece of work. If you guys want to read it, it's probably going to be about 5 chapters long (maybe a bit more)

And to avoid the question - No, this time Loki isn't faking the amnesia, he doesn't remember a thing ;)

Have fun and tell me what you think

John Doe

There was more than one reason why somebody would choose to become a doctor. In surveys the explanations were always the same – the altruistic desire to help people. At least some of them were honest and stated that money had been their main motivation. Idiots. Except for a few lucky ones, there was no money in medicine whatsoever.

For Stephen it had been ambition and fascination. Somebody like him was born for a competitive field and Stephen would never deny that he was an adrenaline junkie. Harbouring a god-complex since he had been 13 years old. Stephen was born to be a surgeon. Saving a life was a thrill and Stephen couldn't think of anything more exciting than an 8 to 12 hour surgery where every move of the scalpel demanded complete genius.

Stephen definitely hadn't become a surgeon for the catastrophes. Multiple crashes on the highway, a collapsed mall, a derailed train or an alien invasion. Granted, the last one was better than the other ones, because it was definitely out of the ordinary.

So there was extra-terrestrial life and it didn't have much sympathy for mankind. Stephen couldn't dwell on that thought too long since he was up to his elbows in other people's entrails. What would he give for a brain tumour or an aneurysm or even ordinary nerve damages? No, trauma wounds all over and since this was very obvious a catastrophic event all the hospitals were flooded with patients and every single doctor in New York had to patch up the injured like an ordinary trauma surgeon. Those butchers.

For obvious reasons Stephen wasn't in his best mood that day in the May of 2012. Not just that one day. Even after that weird, costume-wearing group called the Avengers had ended the invasion the flood of injured people wouldn't stop. The cynic in Stephen thought that after 72 hours it would all be over, because whoever the firemen were going to pull from the debris would already be dead at this time.

No, even Stephen wasn't so cold that all of this misery didn't touch him or did not have him lying awake in bed despite overwhelming exhaustion. Nonetheless it had always been easier for Stephen to distance himself from patients than other doctors.

Well, Stephen had already pointed out that he hadn't become a doctor to help people.

In contrast to Christine Palmer. Stephen often wondered how she had become that good of a surgeon with all that emotional involvement. The popular belief that is easier to cut people open when you only viewed them as a piece of meat was definitely true. Christine didn't do that, she always saw the person, the entire life she was operating on. Still doing a marvellous job, there was no denying her brilliance and that was also a reason why Stephen felt attracted to her. That didn't mean though that he wasn't going to point out when Christine's emotional side got the better of her. Especially when it was late, his shift was over and he wanted nothing more to get out the hospital and to that fancy, overpriced French restaurant that he had reserved a table at. One had to love this city, not a single week had passed since the alien invasion and yet life was already completely back to normal. Except for the debris in the streets and the broken buildings.

When Christine came walking down the hall Stephen instantly shook his head and made a gesture that should indicate her to stop. "No. Everything in this picture is wrong. You are still wearing scrubs. Go change. Look gorgeous. We deserve to get out of here."

Christine's gaze was half an apology and half a reproach. "Stephen, I can't leave yet."

“Sure, you can. Turn around, go to the changing room, get changed and then we’re out of here. You’ve been here for almost 72 straight, you are no help to anyone anymore.” Even Stephen could tell that his charm had suffered after the last three days.

At least Christine knew him well enough to be unbothered by that. “Look, Stephen, there is this patient they brought in yesterday...”

“There are literally hundreds of patients that were brought in yesterday. The hospital is full doctors who can take care of them. Doctors who actually got some sleep during the last week. Whatever you are going to say I am not interested... except it is the most screwed up the spinal cord injury I have ever seen.” But that would be too good to be true.

Shaking her head Christine held up the file and Stephen sighed as he grabbed it. “This better be something good.”

It was nothing. “Caucasian male in his late twenties or early thirties, severe head trauma resulting in retrograde amnesia. Great, fantastic. He’ll be in good care and definitely doesn’t have to worry about the people he loves. There is nothing though that two surgeons could do for him. Come on, table for two is waiting for us.”

“Listen, Stephen, there is more to it. According to the scans his head injury is a couple of weeks old. Almost every bone in his body must have been broken, but the healing went down so properly that he must have been in professional care. It doesn’t make much sense since the head trauma must have happened at the same time as the rest of his injuries. He doesn’t remember anything before waking up in this hospital. It doesn’t add up.”

Stephen shrugged, refusing to feel intrigued by any of this. “Maybe he is lying.”

“He can’t fake the injuries. Or the scar tissue all over his back. I think he might have been imprisoned and... abused and he managed to escape during the invasion. The memory loss could be traumatic and not be related to the head trauma.”

“And you are telling me this why?” Stephen would have whined if it wasn’t so beneath him.

Christine shrugged, not hiding her frustration. “Because that man is going through a complete nightmare. It’s incredibly scary. Being completely alone, not knowing who you are, but knowing that probably something awful happened to you. The police will have to question him. They already have their hands full with... well everything.”

Stephen arched an eyebrow. “So he needs you to hold his hand until an officer shows up?”

Rather unexpected Christine laughed, shaking her head. “Believe me, that man doesn’t need comfort. He is as just easy to talk to as you. Anyway, he is completely alone and a case of amnesia is definitely not a priority right now. I’m going to take care of him for now. That’s more important than dinner tonight. You must understand that.”

No, Stephen didn’t have to do anything, but he knew Christine. Emotional involvement was the worst. “Okay, fine. How about we take a look at your patient and if he wants us to leave – we leave.”

Instantly Christine shut him down. “I am not going to let you antagonize a patient because you want to get out of here.”

“Maybe his case is more interesting than I thought. Come on, let’s go.”

There were no words to express Stephen's disinterest, but he hoped that he could talk either the patient or Christine into calling it a night. Amnesia cases were good for movies or psychologists, but they had nothing to offer to a surgeon.

Since the hospital was bursting Christine's patient didn't have his own room, he had to make due with a bed in the hallway. He definitely looked like shit and still better than most of the people. Skin pale as cray, dark rings beneath his eyes and he definitely hadn't eaten something in a long time. Also, he wasn't in a good mood.

"Doctor Palmer, it's not like I am not appreciating the comfort of his bed that's trying to break my spine. I want to leave now."

Perhaps Stephen had been too fast to judge. That man seemed absolutely reasonable. "You heard him, Christine, he wants to leave. Time for us to head out too."

Christine shot him a dark glare and the patient narrowed his eyes at him. That man definitely needed to wash his hair. It was greasy, dirty and too long. "And who are you?"

"I am the man who wants to go to dinner." Stephen crossed his arms in front of his chest while Christine stepped in front of him. "Sir, you cannot leave just yet. You still have to stay here for the police questioning and..."

Suddenly the patient wasn't interested in Stephen anymore and focused on Christine, huffing in annoyance. "If I am not able to remember my own name how am I supposed to tell them what happened to me."

"I admit that I have no idea how you feel and how frustrating this must be, but the police might be able to help us finding out your identity."

Stephen sighed inwardly, because Christine sounded so empathic, caring and that would probably destroy her one day. Alright, fate had decided to be a bitch to this man, but there was nothing Christine could do for him, so why get invested in the first place?

"After everything I have heard about what is going on outside, I am convinced that the police has more important things to do than showing my photograph around. Physically I am fine, so I can leave which I am going to do." The black-haired guy got up from his bed and while Christine helplessly talked about how she fiercely advised against him leaving, Stephen moaned at the absurdity of the situation. "Okay, you can leave immediately if you want to. You don't know the state the city is currently in, but believe me the hospital is glad about every free bed."

Spinning around Christine shot him a fiery gaze that was probably supposed to crush his soul. Fortunately Stephen hadn't been finished. "Just one question – where are you going to go? You have no idea who you are. Where you live and since you've been found without ID or wallet, you also have no money. Where do you want to go?"

The patient had very intense green eyes and Stephen didn't miss that he had put a little bit of doubt in them. That was how you dealt with people driven by emotions, confrontation with logic and reality. For five seconds he remained silent, giving Stephen the opportunity to closely check out how even the hospital gown couldn't hide the gaunt silhouette. After everything Stephen had seen during the last three days nothing shouldn't be able to shake him up. So much misery, wounds and death caused by forces that had nothing human about them. If Christine was right, this man had ended up in hospital and without memory because of another person. Although Stephen had little up to no faith in humanity, he didn't need a reminder of how cruel people could be. Not right now.

The file in his hand mentioned vitamin d deficiency. Lack of exposure to sunlight and malnutrition which also explained the horrid colour of his skin. Not that Stephen cared much, but he felt the intense urge to shove a big spoon of food into the man's mouth.

"Alright, I will admit you have a point there although I have no idea who you are and how this is any of your business." The patient raised his chin slightly, trying to look intimidating or something like that. It certainly didn't work since he looked like Stephen could break him in half with one hand.

"The name is Doctor Stephen Strange and if you only have a glimmer of intelligence you have to realise that it is in your best interest to stay here. Nobody out there is interesting in or has the means to help you. So sit tight and wait for the officers to question you."

Seemingly defeated but clearly upset the patient sat down on the edge of his bed and let his eyes ghost around the hall. "Thanks for believing in my abilities, but this absolutely not the environment I'd like to spend my time in."

Sure, the hallway was full of beds, patients, crying children and completely overwhelmed staff. Nobody would want to spend any time here which was also the reason why Stephen was so eager to finally get out of here. With Christine. An amnesiac man should have other things on his mind. "Like I said, the almost world-ending catastrophe out there forces unusual circumstances on all of us. Look at Doctor Palmer for example. She hasn't left the hospital for three days and is supposed to have dinner in half an hour."

"Stephen..." Christine mumbled his name as some kind of warning before turning back to John Doe. "There might be a way to at least find out your name." She handed him a clipboard with a piece of paper and a pen. "Try to write down your name."

John Doe's face darkened and despite not knowing a thing about him, Stephen could tell that he felt like they were making fun of him. Which he didn't like. "Doctor Palmer, did you forget that I cannot remember anything?! You, nurse Chadwell and this guy over here are the only people in the entire world that I know! I have no idea how I got here or if I am allergic to walnuts. I have no idea how to write my damned name!"

"Well, it's definitely something British..." Stephen muttered under his breath, his patience running thin. He could be eating coq au vin right now.

"Excuse me?" John Doe's eyebrows shot up and Stephen shrugged. "You're accent is so thick I am surprised you haven't used the words 'bullocks', 'jolly' or 'telly'."

Seeking confirmation John Doe looked at Christine who smiled softly and then nodded. "You sound very English, that's true. Another reason why I don't think you should leave. Anyway what I meant when I said you should write your name... A signature is part of our muscle memory. Your hand remembers how to write your name even you don't remember what you are called. It's important that you don't think about it. Just let your hand do the work."

Stephen couldn't help but noticed how expressive John Doe's face was. From anger, to surprise, to disbelief. "That could work?"

"We won't find out if you don't try."

John Doe had a very expressive face and a very deep sigh. Eventually he pressed the pen against the paper and wrote something down without even looking at it. Christine gave him a warm and friendly smile before taking the sheet and glancing at it. "Oh..."

“Oh?”

Glancing over Christine’s shoulder Stephen saw what John Doe had written down. It definitely wasn’t a name. It wasn’t even English or letters of the Latin alphabet.

“Could that be Mandarin?” Christine gave Stephen the sheet, but he wasn’t much of a help. “I have no idea. Looks more like a rune to me.”

“Great, I am British and obviously illiterate.” John Doe grunted, running one hand through his hair, then stopped mid-motion. That was no surprise, at some point he had to notice that his hair was a disgusting mess.

“I don’t know about the state of the British education system, but I believe they still teach people how to read and write. Write something else down. Go ahead.” Rather urgently Stephen shoved the clipboard back into John Doe’s hands. After glaring at him John Doe began to write down a couple of words before holding up the clipboard.

You are a jerk

Christine laughed heartily. “See? Definitely literate.”

And an asshole, but Stephen only added that inwardly.

The fact that he knew how to write didn’t make John Doe very happy though. Maybe Stephen should point out that his handwriting was ridiculously elegant and beautiful. “Wonderful, that’s almost an entire identity, isn’t it? I am British and I know how to write.”

“I am sure that the police is going to help us to find out more. It’s going to be alright.” Christine once more tried to make her patient feel better, but John Doe’s mouth remained a straight line. For him the conversation seemed to be over. “I heard you have plans for dinner, Doctor Palmer. I wish you a pleasant night.”

Saying that John Doe lay down on his back and covered his eyes with his hand. Stephen could see how Christine got ready to protest, so he took her arm and shook his head. That man evidently wanted to be left alone and Stephen wanted to get out of here. Win-win situation. Reluctantly Christine mumbled a soft goodbye and let Stephen steer her away. Of course she told nurse Chadwell on the way to keep an eye on John Doe.

Stephen was ready to start believing in miracles when Christine sat next to him in the car. Finally out of the hospital. Thank god, especially the one Stephen didn’t believe in. “I partly understand that you feel sorry for him, but you are a surgeon. It’s not your job to help him remembering who he was.”

“The sheer size of your empathy is overwhelming, Doctor Strange.” Christine replied drily, more interested in looking outside the window than looking at Stephen.

Alright, even Stephen could tell when he had crossed a line and when it was time to tread lightly. “Fine, I admit that he is in a horrid situation and of course you feel sorry for him, because you have... you know... a heart.”

That was enough to make Christine turn her head to him and Stephen could make out the hint of a smile. “Unlike other people?”

“I do have a heart, everybody has a heart. It is medically impossible to live without a heart. I was referring to the metaphorical heart. That causes you to care about other people. Often irrationally. I

merely wondered what makes him so special when you operated on two little girls yesterday. For example.”

Christine made a vague gesture that should probably tell him that she didn’t know herself. “I want to find out what happened to him. It’s terrible that... Aliens attacked this city. Aliens. When the entire human race gets attacked as one, shouldn’t be we able to at least be decent to each other? For three days we were knee-deep in either dead or severely wounded people. Then he shows up, has no idea who he is and every bone in his body has been broken some time ago. He’s scarred, malnourished and probably hasn’t seen the sun in months... Aliens didn’t do that to him but other people. I know we both have seen bad things before, but... today it’s just so much harder.”

Despite himself Stephen swallowed hard. “I guess I can understand that. Still... you’re his surgeon. There is not much you can do to help him. The police will talk to him, take his photograph, fingerprints and hopefully find out who he is.”

His optimism definitely didn’t rub off on Christine. “He isn’t American. What chance is there that they find out who he is? I know what happens to these people when their identity remains unknown. He has no name, no social security number. They’ll drop him off at the next homeless shelter and he’ll be forced to do little jobs and be paid under the table for the rest of his life.”

“If he doesn’t remember or if his identity remains unknown. A lot of if’s there, Christine. What I’m trying to say is... it’s part of you to empathize with your patients. I stopped trying to talk you out of that years ago. I just want you to be careful and at least try to take a step back sometimes. Try to leave them at the hospital. Otherwise they’ll drag you down with them.”

Stephen glanced at Christine in surprise when he felt her putting her hand on his lower arm. Now she was smiling for real. “Who would have thought that you are able to care about other people after all?”

“I know. Don’t tell anybody.”

Like Stephen wouldn’t tell anybody that the sound of Christine laughing made him feel a lot lither. Christine took his hand and pressed a kiss onto it before they spend the rest of the ride in silence.

Into the unknown

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

Here is part 2 of the story. Have fun :D

Stephen didn't like being touched. Honestly, he was convinced that the vast majority of the human population didn't want a complete stranger to hug or grope them, but for some reason they refused to whine and complain about it like they should. Kind of hypocritical since Stephen wasn't complaining now when the wife of the man he had just saved wound her arms around him, squeezing way too tight. Now that was just rude. Big, loud and overwhelming 'thank you's were Stephen's preferred form of appreciation.

As quickly as he could Stephen freed himself, wished her good luck and then stalked away to feel pretty good about himself. Hardly anyone could have done what he accomplished today. Although Stephen's own opinion of himself was the one that mattered most, he liked to have others talking about how great he did. Like Christine. She was as great of a surgeon that Stephen valued what she said about his skills. And her personal opinion wasn't completely unimportant either.

Anyway Stephen had been in surgery for the last 12 hours and he hadn't lost a single patient. It was time to celebrate. Christine was easy to find and Stephen was a bit annoyed how he instantly knew where to find her.

John Doe was sitting on his bed in the hallway, Christine and two police officers were standing next to him. None of them looked very happy. Not very surprising since there wasn't much that the police could do for him. The best case scenario was that he was a missing person and they could find out his identity like that. Unlikely since John Doe was clearly British and Stephen wasn't naïve, the police and all other authorities had way better things to do than finding out the identity of one person with amnesia.

Nonetheless, Stephen was a naturally curious person. He slowly joined the little party, exactly at the right time to hear that the officers wanted to see the clothes that John Doe had worn when he had been found.

"That shouldn't be a problem. We kept them since..." Christine hesitated, glancing at John Doe who looked like a blank slate. "... there were bloodstains on them. Your blood. Apart from the cut above your eyes there weren't any visible injuries, so the blood has to have come from an older injury."

"Sounds like I got around." John Doe sighed, but Stephen could hear a hint of laughter. Good, Stephen hated whiners.

One of the officers wrote something down on his little notepad. "And there is nothing you remember before you woke up at the hospital? Images, sounds, flashes? The tiniest bit could be able to help us."

John Doe gave himself a few seconds to think about it before he shook his head. "Nothing. I also

couldn't answer the questions that the doctor asked me when I woke up. What's your name. What day is it. Who is the president. No idea. Same goes for the British prime minister. I can't tell you if I am labour or tory. What I can tell you is that I have no fondness for people that can't talk at a normal volume. It's incredibly rude and annoying." John Doe's eyes became a lot smaller as he looked past the office and Stephen couldn't agree more.

A German teenage girl was lying in a bed a couple of feet down the hall and her mother had been terrorising the staff for two days now. One should imagine that after an alien attack people would be thankful that their child was still alive, but that woman kept complaining in broken English about the quality of her daughter's pillows. Now she was rapidly talking at her child who had her eyes half closed, probably trying to sleep. Yes, Stephen felt for her and for everybody else. Especially for himself.

The officer glanced at the other bed before deciding to ignore them, although he could clearly understand what the problem was. "Alright. We have your photographs and your fingerprints. We'll run them through the database and you will hear from us as soon as we have the results."

John Doe nodded and tried to say something when the high-pitched voice of the woman started nagging on all of their nerves again. For John Doe it was probably more than he could take after spending almost two days next to them. "Niemand interessiert sich dafür wie schlecht das Essen ist! Das ist ein Krankhaus – die Qualität des Essens ist nicht die erste Priorität! Kranke und verletzte Menschen versuchen hier sich zu erholen, also tun Sie uns allen einen Gefallen und halten Sie ihren Mund!"

Christine blinked in disbelief, the officers seemed confused and the German woman stared at John Doe with her mouth open. She looked so wonderfully shocked that Stephen desperately hoped that John Doe had used some nasty expression. At least she kept her mouth shut now and they all got to enjoy the sweet silence. Wouldn't it be wonderful if people stopped talking altogether? In the hospital or in Stephen's presence.

"Okay, now we have something new to add to the list. British, literate and speaks German." That was the first thing Stephen said since joining them and Christine only now noticed him. Her surprise couldn't be denied. Stephen understood the sentiment.

"Doctor Strange is right. Maybe that will help us to find out more about you." Christine smiled encouragingly at John Doe whose face didn't give anything away. Probably he didn't know what to think yet.

The officer swiped right in. "We'll contact the British embassy and the German one as well. Hopefully they will be able to help us. Thank you, Doctor Palmer. Goodbye, sir."

"Thanks, gentlemen." John Doe shook both of their hands and Christine excused herself to lead the officers outside. Which left only Stephen and John Doe. A nurse must have made sure he got access to one of the bathrooms since his hair was suddenly clean. Now it just needed a cut, desperately.

John Doe wasn't even looking at him, seemingly lost in thought and it would be ridiculously easy for Stephen to walk away, but for some reason he stayed and voiced the first thought that came to his mind. "Do you think they'll be smart enough to check out the Austrian and Swiss consulate generals?"

Glancing at him John Doe snorted. "You forgot Luxembourg and Liechtenstein."

"You are definitely European." Stephen crossed his arms in front of his chest and decided to throw

him a little challenge. “I am no expert on languages, so I can’t tell how good or bad your German actually is. What about you? Now that you know that you can at least speak some of it... can you access the language now?”

“Ich denke schon und auch wenn diese dämliche Frau mir den letzten Nerv raubt, hat sie Recht. Die Bettwäsche ist eine Zumutung.“

„Yeah, sounds good enough for me. Maybe you were a translator.“

“Or I had a German girlfriend. I speak another language. Millions of people do. That’s not really going to help me find out anything about myself. Why are you here anyway? Doctor Palmer isn’t here anymore.”

Well, Stephen couldn’t expect John Doe to believe that Stephen would stick around him because he cared. There was some mild curiosity, but that’s about it. “You’re the only amnesiac patient and therefore a little bit of a sensation.”

“Really? An alien invasion and I am the sensation?”

“Nobody is ever going to tell us details about what happened last week. They’re already collecting all the alien parts and locking them away. For a month now people are going to lose their minds and then things are back to normal. People don’t worry too much about things that are out of their control.” Stephen shrugged, since he personally wasn’t going to give the invasion much more thought than he already had. He wasn’t an idiot or naïve. The government was going to keep all information from them anyway and Stephen would be damned if they hadn’t known that something like this was going to happen.

“Does that also apply to me?” John Doe looked genuinely curious. “I have no control about my memory loss. What am I supposed to do about it?”

“Honestly – I have no idea. It’s too soon to ask that question anyway. The police is now looking into it. Better wait for the results before imagining the worst case scenarios.”

“They are not going to find anything.” John Doe was mumbling softly, not sounding as resigned as he probably should have but nonetheless strangely convinced. So much that Stephen couldn’t help but ask “How are you so sure about that?”

No casual shrug or sigh, John Doe tilted his head, his eyes ghosting across the room, not focusing one point. Eventually he turned back to Stephen. “I don’t know. It’s a feeling. I don’t feel like I belong here. So why should there be somebody looking for me?”

For one moment Stephen expected the inevitable breakdown and those would definitely be the worst circumstances imaginable. With Stephen being the only person around. Since he was an emotional cripple pretty much anybody would be better suited for this task than him. Christine was already interested in this guy’s wellbeing and she actually knew how to listen to other people’s worries without making fun of them. Stephen was very bad at that and if John Doe finally reacted like any other human being to this situation he was in, with despair, sobbing and crying, then Stephen should be anywhere but here.

None of that happened though. Not even a hint of sadness or desperation. John Doe remained as calm and collected as he had been the entire time.

Which was quite nice. Stephen definitely preferred that to most of the reactions he got from patients the rest of the day. “Well, this is a hospital. You definitely don’t belong here. You don’t

remember being out in the city, so you can't know if it was your home or not.”

“It's not.” John Doe replied casually. “I know that it's not.”

It happened rarely, but Stephen had no idea what to say now. The man right in front of him didn't look like he needed comfort that Stephen couldn't and especially didn't want to offer. So instead Stephen told him that he had patients to look after.

One and a half days Stephen got to spend without thinking about John Doe and he would have been able to continue like that for a very long time if it hadn't been for Christine. She had to bring him up, at Stephen's place. On his day off. A lot of things that Stephen didn't appreciate.

Christine's eyes were fixed on her phone when Stephen put down a plate of delicious eggs benedict. To say it was rather unusual for Christine to stare at this tiny screen during her spare time would be an understatement.

“Exciting news?” Stephen asked, sitting down opposite of her. Feeling content Stephen watched her putting down the phone before sighing deeply. Now that couldn't be a good sign. “What is it?”

“Police didn't find anything that could help out John Doe's identity. His fingerprints aren't in any database. His photograph doesn't match up with any missing British or German person. There isn't even the slightest hint who he could be.”

Not even trying to feign interest Stephen took a sip from his coffee. “Are we talking about him at home now?”

This time Christine didn't even bother to point out to him that he was an insensible jerk and instead poked her eggs with her fork. Fine, Stephen could try to be decent person, it was still early morning after all. “You have nurse Chadwell keeping you updated on him?”

“Yes, because I care about what's going to happen to him.”

“I know and I realised that I cannot talk you out of that anymore. I just wonder why.”

Christine sighed, a clear sign that Stephen was already exhausting her. “Because I sympathize with him. We can't find out who he is and now he is left with nothing after the invasion.”

“Like hundreds of other people whose homes got destroyed and who mourn their dead friends and family members.”

“That's exactly it.” Christine soundly put her fork down on the table. “Maybe he still has all of that. Maybe he still has a home, a family and friends who are looking for him who think he is dead. It could all be right around the corner and he doesn't know. That idea is terrifying. Moreover he was definitely victim of a violent crime. Stephen, he shows all the signs of somebody who has been kept imprisoned.”

“Except for the fact that every single bone fracture has healed so perfectly that he must have been treated by professionals.” Stephen pointed out and Christine nodded reluctantly. “Yes, I admit some things don't seem to add up, but it doesn't change where he is now. No idea who he is and therefore nobody is responsible of taking care of him. Without a birth certificate or a social security number he is going to end up on the streets. That shouldn't have to be the case.”

Since Stephen knew that he would only make her angry with everything that he might say, he

decided to remain silent. It wasn't like he didn't think Christine was right, but she couldn't feel responsible for her patient's fate. Sooner or later that would end up screwing her up and that was something Stephen definitely didn't want.

The next time Stephen saw John Doe was after a successful surgery and it was rather by accident. Stephen didn't even walk by his bed, but was checking his schedule after handing a nurse an updated file. Across the whole was nurse Gonzalez, talking with John Doe. In rapid Spanish. Huh.

Before Stephen could even try to actually listen to them John Doe turned around and walked off. Probably back to his bed in the hallway. Fine, Stephen should be damned, but he couldn't deny a tingle of curiosity. How many foreign languages did the average person speak?

"Nurse Gonzalez, do you have a second?"

He received a nice smile and she instantly came over to him. "Doctor Strange?"

"Just a quick question. I saw you talking to our amnesia patient."

The smile on her pretty face faltered a little bit. "Yes, the poor guy. I wish there was something we could do to help him..."

Obviously women were into men with no memory despite the fact that they could easily be a serial killer or still be living with their mother. Or both. Anyway, Stephen was getting off topic. "You were talking in Spanish?"

"Yes, I was muttering to myself after dealing with an unpleasant patient. He heard it and began talking in Spanish to me. He was... amused by my annoyance." Were those hearts in her eyes? Seriously, John Doe was all bones covered with a thin layer of skin and a nasty haircut. Fantastic, Stephen was off topic again.

"Right, about that. How good is his Spanish? You think he learned it in school? Or is he fluent?"

Nurse Gonzalez was all smiles again and Stephen thought that she seemed rather impressed. "His Spanish is flawless. If I didn't know better I would be 100% sure that he was a native speaker."

Interesting. "Why can't he be a native speaker?"

"He sounds Mexican and he uses expressions that are typical for Mexican Spanish. Does he look very Mexican to you?"

The answer to that was a clear no. Stephen thanked her and for the first time could understand Christine's fascination. At least a little bit. John Doe sounded like he had grown up in Westminster when he was speaking English. Stephen had no idea about his German, but it had sounded pretty good and now his Spanish was so perfect that he could fool a native. Fine, it was more than possible that he had been raised bilingual and then he had learned another language. Why not?

Stephen was going to organize a little experiment. His least favourite intern got the mission to head to the next newspaper kiosk and when he came back Stephen had five different journals from all over the world.

John Doe was easy to find, sitting Indian style on his bed, scanning through a magazine that he had probably snatched from the waiting room. Taken aback he arched an eyebrow when Stephen's shadow fell over him. "Doctor Strange? What gives me the honour?"

Oh, now he was being sarcastic. Stephen was already covering that part, thank you very much. "I

noticed you had a chat with Nurse Gonzalez.”

“Yes, I figured I have a gift for languages.”

“I am here to test that. Here.” Stephen handed John Doe the first journal and John Doe frowned.
“What is this?”

“You tell me?”

Green eyes that were active, alive and full of energy. Unlike the rest of his body. Those eyes ghosted now over the front page. “The Portuguese parliament approves the inquiry committee against a minister called Aveiro.”

Fine, now they could add Portuguese to the list. Taking the journal back, Stephen gave him the Italian newspaper. “What about this one?”

“People are angry because the AC Milan bought a new footballer that they don’t need for 50 million euro.”

“Next one.”

By the end of their little experiment it was proven that John Doe could at least read Portuguese, Italian, French, Russian and Hebrew. To be frank, Stephen was severely impressed and that never happened. Therefore he definitely wasn’t going to let John Doe see that. Keeping his face as passive and neutral as possible Stephen cleared his throat. “I must have underestimated the British education system. Seven foreign languages isn’t bad.”

What also wasn’t bad was the fact that Stephen finally got to see some genuine emotion on John Doe’s face. Something like wonder. Still not enough to be appropriate for the situation he was in, but he finally didn’t look so perfectly composed. “So... how can I be sure to be British if I can speak half the languages that are spoken in Europe?”

“Because nobody learns to speak English with an English accent. This is good news. Nobody speaks that many languages if it isn’t part of their job. You were probably an interpreter at the UN. Or something like that. It could help us find out something about you.”

It didn’t help. It almost seemed like John Doe had only started to exist one week ago. Stephen still wasn’t really invested in his tragic story, but Christine was clearly upset that they couldn’t keep him at the hospital any longer. There was no medical reason to have him stay, they desperately needed all their resources.

For John Doe that meant social service and some homeless shelter. Granted, Stephen couldn’t really picture him there, but there was nothing anybody could do. Without a social security number you were totally screwed in this country or anywhere.

Since Christine felt so strongly for him, she made sure that John Doe got at least a set of new clothes before he had to leave. Stephen didn’t feel inclined to join in on the goodbye, he preferred to pretend to write in a file while observing them from across the hall.

They were talking. Christine was so obviously unhappy with how things were going while John Doe half smiled. It was the first time Stephen saw him smiling. It was rather odd how much it could change one’s appearance. Stephen liked it that John Doe was absolutely ready and unafraid to go out there although life had dealt him the shittiest cards imaginable. He wasn’t asking for

anything.

John Doe held out his hand and Christine took it. Despite the distance Stephen could tell that the words leaving John Doe's mouth were 'Thank you'.

Then he left, walked out the hospital doors and was gone. Another tragic case would ultimately replace him. Tomorrow or the day after.

Christine, still upset, joined Stephen and slightly leaned against him. As much as Stephen would accept at the hospital. "You could have said goodbye, you know?"

"Why? I doubt that he was asking for me."

Christine didn't answer him, a bit lost in thought. "I just hope that he is going to be okay."

Honestly, Stephen hoped so too, but he doubted that they would know.

A new version

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

It's three years later and Loki has a new name :)

Have fun :)

2015

Everybody who knew Stephen was aware of his fancy and rather expensive taste. Stephen enjoyed the finer things in life and whenever he bought anything, he paid attention to quality. Every little bit of technology in Stephen's apartment was up to the newest and highest standard. Therefore it would probably surprise people that Stephen still liked to buy records at the store instead of buying them digitally. Mostly for the simple reason that he enjoyed having several very big shelves full of CDs in his living room. It looked good and Stephen liked actually looking at his collection and he liked other people seeing it. If Stephen happened to invite somebody over which was rarely the case. Wasn't that the main idea of having a home? To have a place to hide from other people.

Anyway, Stephen found it immensely pleasant and at the same time relaxing to scan through the variety of records that he could find at his favourite store. There was always some CD of some band that had only existed for two years during the 60s that even Stephen had never heard of. Today was his day off, so Stephen had all the time in the world to check out all the different covers. Strangely enough it wasn't a record that caught Stephen's eye that day.

At first Stephen wasn't even sure what had raised his attention. There were a couple of people besides him in the store and usually Stephen was good at ignoring everybody. So he was kind of surprised himself when his eyes flickered to follow the movements of a man across the room from him. It took Stephen a few seconds to figure out why he had noticed him in the first place. He seemed somewhat familiar.

Stephen was good with faces when he thought people important enough to be remembered. Everybody else he forgot about immediately. Therefore it was very odd for him to believe that he had seen someone before. Due to his job Stephen met a lot of people every day, but he didn't actually remember patients. Only surgeries.

Nonetheless it wasn't the man's brain or nerve system that had made Stephen notice him. All he had seen was the man's profile from a couple of feet away. It bugged Stephen that he couldn't tell where he had seen him before and he liked it even less since that distracted him from finding a new record. Unfortunately Stephen was the type of guy who would let little things like that ruin his whole day. Alright, he was going to find this out.

Picking up a CD Stephen pretended to look at it since staring across the room have been too obvious and rather uncomfortable. The man was checking out a record himself and Stephen mentally took apart his appearance. There was a lot to see after all. One should always start with the shoes, they told you a lot about how much another person cared about their appearance. Clean and classy. Stephen had no idea if they were expensive or not, but they definitely looked nice.

Which was more important anyway.

Dark blue jeans, a tight blazer and a scarf. The colour of the latter one was hard to name, something between blue and green. All of it looked good, a nice ensemble that clearly showed off a sportive body underneath. No, Stephen didn't remember people's styles, but he could still appreciate them. No recognition.

Fine, perhaps he should concentrate on the face. What Stephen could see from here were prominent cheekbones, short brown/blackish hair and a frown. No, Stephen had no idea where to put him. Shouldn't be that hard.

Former patient? Unlikely. Stephen hardly remembered their faces. Fellow surgeon or somebody he had run into at university? If so, he obviously wasn't worth remembering. It definitely annoyed Stephen that he had no idea who he was looking at. There were no good or bad sentiments tied to him, just an awkward sense of familiarity.

And now the guy was looking back at him. Sure, how long could you expect somebody not to notice that he was being stared at. Stephen wasn't going to act like a teenager who got caught doing something stupid. No quick looking away and pretending that he hadn't checked him out in the first place. Instead Stephen held his gaze for a couple of seconds before it would get even weirder and finally turned his focus back to the record in his hands.

Alright, it seemed like Stephen wasn't going to figure this out. It bugged him, but he could live with the not knowing. Since Stephen only remembered important things, he decided that it wouldn't bother him.

It bothered the other one though. Without looking up Stephen could tell that somebody was walking up to him. Okay, why not? If somebody had stared at him, Stephen would be curious too. Or rather pissed off.

“Doctor Strange?”

Fine, at least Stephen wasn't imagining things. Raising his head Stephen was almost eager to find out who was talking to him. Expressive green eyes, thin lips and black hair that he wore as a side cut. His fringe partly covered the right side of his forehead. There was no denying that Stephen knew him, but he still couldn't...

“You don't remember me, right?” No smile but a hint of amusement in his voice and a glint in his eyes that Stephen couldn't quite...

Oh.

Well, somebody looked different.

“You are John Doe.”

The man Stephen had last seen three years ago laughed. Short and soft. “That's not the name I go by.”

Right, that shouldn't be surprising. Given the medical data that Stephen remembered clear as day it was highly unlikely that John Doe would ever get his memories back, so there was no point asking if his name had come back to him. “So what do you call yourself?”

“Jason. But I prefer Jay.”

It didn't fit. At all. "How did you come up with it?"

"I checked out lists of the most popular boys' names in the 80s and I hated pretty much all of them. So I used a counting-out rhyme." John Doe alias Jason shrugged slightly and Stephen's first thought was that this was a stupid way to choose a name, but then he realised that everybody else had their parents deciding for them, so it was more or less the same.

Way more interesting than the new name was his appearance. Now knowing who he was Stephen took a moment to look at him again, reinterpreting what he was seeing. The little details now held a very different meaning. Who would have thought that if you took away the malnutrition, the dark rings beneath his eyes replaced them with a decent haircut and nice clothes, you would end up with a very good looking guy?

The clothes were indeed nice. Jason's eyebrows had the perfect shape, he was clean shaven and at close range Stephen could see that his clothes were anything but cheap. So much about the homeless shelter. No, Jason (Stephen really didn't like that name) seemed to be doing just fine. Which didn't make much sense when you knew his history. Nonetheless, Christine would be thrilled to hear that he was okay.

"So except for the new name... how have you been?" There was this familiar spark of curiosity spreading inside of Stephen. He indeed wanted to know what had happened to Jason, although he hadn't given him a single thought in three years. Would Stephen have ever thought of him again if he hadn't run into him today? Probably not.

"I am doing okay. Still no idea about anything that happened before I woke up at the hospital. I am doing alright though. How is Doctor Palmer?"

Stephen didn't mind that he wasn't asking about him. How often had they talked? Two times? "Christine is doing great. She is still investing too much time in her patients. Except for that she couldn't be doing better."

"You are still together?"

Well, Jason obviously still didn't hold back the direct questions. Stephen thought he was the kind of person who always gave people a piece of his mind. If they wanted to or not. "No, Christine finally figured out that she deserved better."

The corners of Jason's mouth twitched as if he wanted to smile. There was nothing malicious about it, more like honest amusement at Stephen's description. Stephen had no idea how he knew that, but he was pretty sure.

"Good for her then."

Stephen shrugged, he wasn't going to into any more detail with a complete stranger. Even the most amical break-up in the history of failed relationships was still something entirely private. It was nobody's business but theirs. Also, Jason might be a patient that Stephen actually remembered, but that was about it.

While Stephen expected him to ask further about Christine Jason nodded at the record in Stephen's hands. "Is the band any good?"

After blinking in surprise Stephen was right back in his element. Medicine and music – two things that Stephen knew everything about. "Rhythm and blues, late 50s. They only released two albums. Awesome to listen to when you're operating on a brain tumour."

“Fantastic. I was planning on doing that next week.”

Jason was funny and Stephen didn’t mind when he took the record from him to take a look at it.
“So have you figured out yet what music you are into?”

“Actually – no. I listen to pretty much everything or I try to. Maybe something will eventually sound familiar. Hasn’t happened until now.” The shrug seemed honest, like he genuinely didn’t care. Stephen had his doubts that this could be possible. “It’s good music. Buy it, listen to it, thank me later.”

Another smile appeared on those lips and Stephen noticed once more that he had never seen him smile three years ago. Which wasn’t surprising the world had been ending, he had been the man without memory and without any prospects for the future. No reason to smile there. “So I am supposed to show up at the hospital, wait for you to be done with whatever surgery you are doing and give you my review of the record?”

“Or you could just leave one of these obnoxiously huge baskets full of fruit and vegetables with a big ‘Thank you’ note.”

Jason slightly raised an eyebrow and his smile was a little crooked. Stephen was reminded of how he had noticed three years ago that he had such an expressive face. The odd thought suddenly crossed Stephen’s mind that Jason definitely had a vast variety of smiles. Friendly ones, sweet ones, wicked one and definitely malicious ones. They would be quite interesting to see.

“Is that what people now give a doctor for saving their life?”

“It would be okay if the basket was filled with good stuff. Mango, passion fruit… who cares about cauliflower?”

That sadly true story earned him another smile and it became clear that Jason had no intention of giving the record back. “It was nice to talk to you, Doctor Strange.”

There was a friendly smile before Jason turned around and walked to the cash register. Stephen continued to watch him as he bought the record and then left the store. Definitely a weird encounter, but Stephen has had way worse.

Christine’s face lit up when Stephen told her about meeting the man formerly known as John Doe two days later. It lasted about 30 seconds before she told him that he was an idiot when he couldn’t answer one of her questions.

Surname? Occupation? Anything else about his life besides that he was doing fine? She affectionately rolled her eyes at him when she realised that Stephen hadn’t asked the most interesting patient she had ever had a single question. Stephen heavily doubted that Jason was even in the top 20 of the most interesting patients. Medically he was a hopelessly boring case.

Anyhow, he had made Christine’s day a little better by relieving her of a worry that she had harboured for three years and that wasn’t so bad.

Stephen was brilliant at his job. That wasn’t just his huge ego talking, the general reception of every medical paper he had ever written had always used the word brilliant. His success rate was astonishing and every intern was scared to death of him and yet all of them would kill each other to

get time in the OR with him. Nobody would ever try to deny that Stephen was a good doctor and an even greater surgeon.

Given that it just seemed unfair and almost unnatural that things could still turn out the worst way possible when Stephen was the one calling the shots. Since Stephen had chosen to be a surgeon the worst way was death. The 31 year old father of three was now lying dead on the table and that was all wrong. At first it had looked like the same surgery that he had done a million times before. Then it had gone wrong, which hadn't even been Stephen's fault. Those things could happen, the normal risk of any surgery, but normally they did not happen when Stephen was the doctor in charge.

The result was all the same, the man was dead and Stephen hadn't been able to do anything to change that. Stephen didn't get loud, that was something he didn't do, but the entire hospital staff still knew that it was better not to approach him when he was in this state. He wished that there was something for him to tear down or even better someone. Instead there was nothing else he could do but tear off his gloves and scrubs and tell the widow that he had failed. Then Stephen was left alone to deal with the fact that even after all his training, education and brilliance that he had acquired – people still could die.

Inwardly Stephen was cursing himself for not doing a good enough job and the man for having the audacity to die. He was still doing that as he was updating the files, Stephen only noticed the nurse when she was standing right in front of him. "Doctor Strange?"

Looking up Stephen was ready to give her a piece of his mind. If she had nothing better to do than distracting him when he was trying to do his job. Stephen was running out of words though when he saw her almost terrified face and the basket in her hands. One single word passed his lips. "What?"

"Somebody left this here for you while you were in surgery." Clearly eager to leave him alone again the nurse put the basket down next him and then stalked away with quick steps.

Rather confused Stephen frowned. Suddenly his misery was forgotten and he almost distrustfully eyed the basket next to him. It was a bit small, easy to carry in one hand and filled with broccoli. Was that some kind of joke? If so, somebody had chosen the wrong day to mess with him.

Scowling Stephen quickly grabbed the card that was tugged in between the broccoli and ran his eyes over it. The message wiped his head clean and that rarely happened to Stephen.

I bought the record, I listened to it. Now it's later and I thank you. Since you don't like cauliflower I thought you would prefer broccoli

I enjoy the record a lot

Jay

The memory of their meeting in the record store came back to him in a flash and Stephen laughed without realising it. Broccoli was in no way better than cauliflower, but that didn't change the fact that this guy had come to the hospital to bring Stephen a gift. Which had been a joke.

Well, this basket here was obviously also a joke, but for some weird reason that Stephen couldn't name, he liked it. Tonight he would have to look up some recipes that contained lots and lots of broccoli. Until then he had a couple of check-ups on his schedule and Stephen felt like he would get through them without losing it completely.

It was three hours later and finally the end of his shift when Stephen picked the basket back up. At home the basket found its new place in the kitchen. After turning on some The Who Stephen took out the broccoli and began chopping it into little pieces. It was only when he was done that he took another look at the card which was now the only thing left in the basket. Previously he had only looked at the front, but as he turned it in his hands Stephen spotted a few more words on the back.

In case you want to recommend another band

And a phone number.

Huh. Stephen blinked, took another look just to be sure. Now that was unexpected.

Sitting down at the table with his broccoli casserole Stephen tried to figure out what exactly that little message was supposed to mean. When a person with memory loss was involved, things were never quite that easy. Recommending a band could just mean recommending a band. That was perfectly within the range of possibility. Jason lacked so much information, perhaps he thought it was nice to have some kind of expert to help him catch up with things. Possible.

He could be trying to make a friend. Which would be totally weird since nobody tried to make friends when you were older than 15. Becoming friends just happened when you were an adult. Most people stayed acquaintances or colleagues. That was Stephen's opinion. Who knew how Jason thought about it.

Possibility number 3 – that was supposed to be an invitation to a date. After all they had only talked about two things. Music and the fact that Stephen and Christine weren't a couple anymore. Honestly, Stephen had no idea. Nothing in Jason's behaviour had hinted at an interest in Stephen. He had joked about Christine deserving better. Which was the truth, so Stephen would let that one pass.

Or, possibility number 4, Jason wanted free medical advice. Wouldn't be the first one. Luckily for him, Stephen was still a very curious person and all these possibilities were intriguing enough for Stephen to want to check them out. For now he was going to enjoy the broccoli, because it was surprisingly delicious.

“Lawson, hello?”

“Jason Lawson? Seriously? That's the name you decided to go with?”

“Who is this?”

“Stephen Strange. Actually when I say my name out loud I realise that I might not be the one to talk.”

“Did you enjoy the broccoli?”

“It was delicious. Thank you. The best gift from a patient I've ever received.”

“That is really sad, especially because it was meant to annoy you.”

“Then you did a very bad job. You liked the record?”

“I think it's very enjoyable. You got any more recommendations? I might be willing to listen to them.”

“You got a pencil and a notepad?”

“I am not a medical student that writes down everything you’re saying. Yes, I saw that. All doctors are addicted to caffeine, aren’t they? There’s a nice café right next to the record store. I’ll pay. Tomorrow, three o’clock?”

“That’s right before my shift, but I can manage.”

“Great.”

“Bring a pencil and a notepad. I hope you write fast, because I don’t like repeating myself.”

Jason laughed and Stephen decided that he was still intrigued.

Discoveries

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

Stephen is discovering new and interesting things about Loki :)

Have fun

“So what exactly are we doing here?” Stephen took a sip from the surprisingly delicious coffee, watching Jason over the edge of the cup.

The other man’s mouth formed half of a grin and he gestured at his own beverage. “Having coffee?”

“Alright, fine. But we’re not seriously meeting up, so I can give you a list of bands that you are going to check out?” Stephen preferred the direct approach and he wanted to see Jason’s reaction. It might help him to figure him out, to know what to expect. Perhaps Jason would just tell him.

No, he answered with another question and a cheeky smile. “Well, you came here. What did you expect?”

“Mostly coffee.” Stephen gave a soft, casual shrug.

“Seems like you are a man whose expectations are easy to fulfil. That’s a bit of a disappointment.”

Yes, Jason was definitely funny and he had a big mouth. That was something that Stephen could appreciate if Jason had the skills to back it up. That meant Stephen hated snarky people when they weren’t smart at the same time. He wasn’t sure yet what Jason had to offer in that department.

“Is this a date?”

Jason didn’t even blink, he was oozing the most casual and relaxed attitude imaginable. “No, it’s not a date. This is a test.”

“A test what for?”

“If you are interesting enough to ask you out on a date.”

The carefree and unafraid attitude had Stephen smiling. By now there were a lot of things that Stephen liked about the other one, which should be worrying. Stephen hardly liked anyone. “The first time we met you told me that I was a jerk.”

Smirking softly Jason didn’t deny that. “I didn’t know anything about myself at that time. Frankly, I don’t know very much even now. What I did learn about myself though during the last three years is that I like jerks. They are much more entertaining than nice guys.”

Fantastic, now Stephen was laughing and once more he could understand where Jason was coming from. That playfulness combined with some snark was something that Stephen could definitely

appreciate. “Speaking about the last three years – what else did you find out about yourself? What do you do? And how are you able to do anything when you don’t have your real identity?”

For the first time now Jason didn’t look completely at ease. His smile faltered the tiniest bit, but remained on his lips. “I got a bit lucky. Or very lucky.”

“So what do you do?” Stephen repeated.

“I listened to what you told me and I took it as advice.”

“I don’t get it, I don’t remember everything that I said three years ago.”

Jason shrugged. “I work as an interpreter for the UN.”

Stephen’s initial reaction was to laugh, but since the expression on Jason’s face didn’t change one bit he quickly became serious again. “That’s actually not possible.”

For the first time he might have said something that didn’t sit right with Jason which was interesting enough. Observing his reactions wasn’t bad either. Jason tilted his chin up, not enough to actually look threatening or challenging. Still, Stephen didn’t miss it. “Obviously not as impossible as you might think.”

“Alright, then enlighten me. I admit that the UN is not my field of expertise, but I am pretty sure that they don’t employ somebody who can’t identify himself. Also people who work as interpreters usually have studied one or several languages… not to mention translations studies. I don’t want to doubt your abilities, but it seems rather unlikely.” That was Stephen’s nice way to say it was completely impossible.

That still left Jason rather unbothered. No, Stephen saw the smirk returning to his face. “I guess then we can definitely say that you’re underestimating my abilities.”

Was he trying to make Stephen curious or to annoy him? Because he was succeeding at both right now. “Fine, prove me wrong. Hardly anybody can do that.”

It became blatantly clear that Jason was confident in whatever he was going to tell Stephen. He was taking his time, taking another sip from his coffee, but he wasn’t buying time. No, Jason was enjoying this. “Alright, I admit that I have no idea myself how all of that could… work out for me. First of all – Jason is my actual name. It’s probably not the one I had before I lost my memory, but it’s the name on my driver’s licence and on my passport. I also got a social security number. That’s what I meant when I said I was lucky.”

That was rather unexpected and Stephen could at least say that he wasn’t going to get bored on this kind of date. “How so?”

Then Jason started telling him a rather weird story without going into too much detail. At first it had seemed like he would end up like anybody else in that horrid situation. Without any papers in a homeless shelter, being destined to work little job for the rest of his life without being able to get a place for himself. Except that Jason wasn’t going to have that. After only one day at the shelter Jason got out of there and talked to people. Eventually he managed to bring a journalist to tears with his story who introduced him to a few lawmakers who eventually granted him a new social security number and he also got new papers the same way. It was also the part of the story where Stephen had to stop him. “Come on, that’s a really cute story, but those things don’t happen that way. Nobody working in politics or law is doing anybody in need a favour out of the goodness of their heart.”

Once more, Jason didn't seem to mind that Stephen doubted his words. "Granted, I thought the same way, but then I learned something new about myself."

"That would be?"

Jason's mouth formed a grin that was so wicked and entralling that Stephen simply knew that this man hadn't been helpless for a single moment in his entire life. Even if said life only consisted of three years that he could remember. Stephen simply couldn't imagine him sitting on his small, deplorable bed at the shelter with his head in his hands. It just didn't fit.

"As it turns out I am extremely persuasive."

"Are you trying to tell me that you talked all of them into it? I don't believe that they would even take the time to talk to you."

Shrugging softly Jason nodded. "I thought the same at the time. I can't give you a better explanation. I guess I am good with words. I talked them into it... same thing with my job. I partly owe it to you. I finally had a name and an identity that the officials would accept, so I thought about what I could do. I had no idea if I had any talents, but I knew that I could speak at least 7 languages. So I said to myself – why not? It's surprisingly easy to get a job as an interpreter without a diploma if you are fluent in every language they throw at you. They also liked the fact that I am a blank slate with no affiliation to any nation or politics."

Stephen hummed pensively. "Seems you're a lucky person." Of course there was more to it. Jason clearly wasn't telling him everything. His story was a little too far-fetched. Sure, Jason made the impression that he knew how to talk and to present himself in the best light possible, but that couldn't possibly be enough to get a new identity and a job at the UN. Despite being a distrustful person Stephen believed that he had new name and a new job, he was merely convinced that a few details in the story were missing.

"I prefer persuasive." Jason smiled again before changing the topic of conversation. "What about you? Are you still content being the nightmare of all patients and interns?"

"The only reason why I became a doctor."

Another smile and Stephen decided that he wouldn't try to find out everything about him immediately. He might enjoy taking his time for that.

Stephen was deemed worthy of a real date and when he asked if his own opinion of Jason mattered in any way he received 'no' as an answer. Stephen really liked him.

Their first was another casual affair. They met for a walk in the park and had frozen yoghurt before Stephen had to start his shift. He would rate it a 7/10. Jason had a very dry, almost sardonic wit and didn't shy away from giving joggers a mouthful when they thought that everybody had immediately jump out of their way and that the whole park belonged to them. His snark was definitely something that Stephen could get used to and the baffled expression on all the other people's faces. What he also liked was that Jason didn't seem to feel the urge to touch him like so many other people did when you were just getting to know each other. A hand on the wrist or a kiss on the cheek. Thank you very much, Stephen could do without that.

It was Friday, they were going to have dinner and the whole day Stephen had been thinking about that with a pleasant, warm feeling in his stomach which was somewhat close a miracle. Thankfully

Stephen could always rely on one of his co-workers to fuck something up and to ruin his day. Or at least part of it. Today it was Robbins. Not a big surprise, that guy's incompetence was only topped by his obnoxiousness and for some reason he still thought they were having some kind of rivalry. They weren't playing on the same league, nor on the same planet.

That didn't stop Robbins from trying to steal Stephen's patients and from being a constant pain. Most days Stephen would only roll his eyes and continue being better in every single way, but today was a little different.

Due to a sudden suicidal desire Robbins had felt the strong urge to steal Stephen's pen. For no reason. Stephen ridiculing him in front patients was nothing new, so why would he get courageous and try to get his revenge today?

"Because you have a date today."

"Excuse me?" Stephen blinked at nurse Chadwell who was gladly answering his question. "You haven't said anything, but you are checking your watch suspiciously often today. Also you told the interns that you're going to get out of here on time. They should only start killing people after you're gone."

Stephen really had to pay more attention on how he acted in front of other people. Not wanting to admit to anything Stephen merely made a 'Huh' sound. He would worry another time that pretty much everybody seemed to know that Stephen had a date. Now he just wanted his pen back.

Of course Robbins denied having taken it, he showed off a sleazy smirk, told Stephen that he was probably overworked and then let him stand there. That jerk-off must have bribed somebody to get his diploma, because nobody would touch him if he offered and there were no other ways for such an idiot to become a surgeon.

How much he would have loved to smack him, but Stephen didn't no interest whatsoever in the consequences.

"Hey, why are you still wearing scrubs? Is there an emergency?"

Wonderful, now Jason was already here, Stephen wasn't ready and pissed off. "I can't leave yet. The poor excuse for a human being over there stole my pen."

No, Stephen wasn't an idiot, he knew how that sounded and Jason's eyebrows instantly met his hairline. "A fellow surgeon stole your pen? And that's why I have to wait for dinner? Because of a pen?"

"It's not just a pen. First of all, he is only doing this to annoy me, because that's the only way he can deal with being a second class surgeon in comparison to me."

"Naturally." Jason nodded and Stephen liked how he made it sound like the most obvious thing that anyone had ever said.

"And it's not just a pen. I am not superstitious, I know I don't need it, but I like to write my reports with it. Also I use it to train my dexterity, twirling it around. It's mine and he stole it and..."

Jason quickly waved him off. "Okay, you won't leave if he doesn't give the pen back. I get it. I guess you have already asked him to give it back?"

"The jerk refuses to admit that he has it in the inner pocket of his coat."

“Hmm... that guy over there who is writing in his file? Give me a second.”

Slightly confused Stephen watched as Jason walked over to Robbins who had his nose buried in a file which gave Jason the opportunity to bump into him without Robbins noticing him beforehand. The whole thing lasted about three seconds. Jason smiled apologetically and then immediately walked back to Stephen who arched an eyebrow. Before he had the chance to ask what the hell hat had been about Jason handed him his favourite black pen that he had already been using as an intern. With his lips slightly parted and definitely a little shocked Stephen took it and stared at Jason who was showing off a small smirk. Definitely happy with himself. “How did you...”

“Get changed. I am hungry and it’s still a 15 minute drive to the restaurant.”

Stephen wasn’t moving a single muscle, he was too busy realising what had just happened. “You pickpocketed it.”

Still smirking Jason shrugged. “I might not be a surgeon, but I have quick fingers. Now go.”

“British, multi-lingual, persuasive and now an expert thief? Maybe you were a secret agent.”

“Doctor Strange, I am hungry. Go.”

For once Stephen did as he was told, in his mind replaying the scene he had just witnessed. Trying to analyse it. No use, he hadn’t paid any attention to Jason’s hands, but he could have only had one or two seconds to steal the pen. Out of the inner pocket and Robbins hadn’t noticed anything. Nobody could do that without intense training. The thought that Jason might have been an international thief made Stephen grin in amusement. At least it wouldn’t get boring in Jason’s company. What could Stephen ask for more?

They first kissed on their third date. No, in the car on the way to their second date. Jason had made a rather dry but hilarious joke about the person driving in front of them and his ideas of a new test for people to obtain their driving licence. It was so mean-spirited that Stephen hadn’t been able to help it. First he had laughed so hard that he was suddenly glad that they were stuck in traffic, because he wouldn’t have been able to drive now anyways.

As soon as he had himself under control again he leaned over and kissed the smirk off Jason’s face. It was clearly the first time he saw Jason genuinely surprised. Pleasantly. Not as surprised as Stephen.

A few seconds later the joke Jason had made also applied to them, since the car behind them had to honk to remind Stephen of how to use the gas pedal. They continued to laugh anyway.

The next day Stephen was healed of the naïve belief that he was a blank slate for other people and that he was good at keeping his cards to his chest. One glance at nurse Chadwell and her knowing smile was enough to almost make Stephen whine.

Christine only made matters worse. On her face was a smile similar to nurse Chadwell’s and she wasn’t very subtle when she joined Stephen at his table in the cantina. “We’re not even close to Christmas and there’s already our first miracle.”

“Oh, just don’t.”

Of course she wouldn’t stop smiling and looking like a smartass. “I was starting to feel worried about you.”

“This conversation ends right now and we’ll pretend we never had it in the first place.”

“I wouldn’t have said anything if it wasn’t so damned obvious. First everybody is talking about the guy that picked you up at the hospital, which is a small miracle itself and then you’re all smiles although there is nothing interesting on your schedule. At all. I happy for you. I know you don’t want to talk about these things and you want to talk about them even less with me, but I am happy for you.”

Well, she was definitely right, Stephen didn’t like talking about this. Sure, soon enough he would have to tell Christine that he was dating the amnesiac guy from three years ago. She would ask one million questions and rightly so, but Stephen would be able to answer them. Then Christine would raise an eyebrow at him for not knowing enough about his him. Yes, Stephen was going to fill in the blanks about Jason, eventually. If they should end up dating longer than for a week.

After dating for a week Stephen got to see Jason’s apartment while driving there Stephen thought how odd this situation was. Everything about Jason was odd. Sometimes when Stephen called him that, he pondered about Jason not even being his real name. Not that it mattered much. What mattered was the simple fact that Stephen was looking forward to every meeting with Jason. Every single one. Stephen wondered why he wasn’t freaking out yet or why he wasn’t bored.

Jason opened the door, greeted Stephen with the hint of a kiss and invited him inside. “Welcome. Shall I give you the tour?”

The apartment was excessively small in comparison to Stephen’s, but Jason once more proved that he had taste. Everything was stylish, bright and definitely not cheap. Stephen liked it. Just like the wine that Jason served and that he laughed at the right times when Stephen told him a story about his interns. He also liked the way Jason kissed and that he taught Stephen how to say ‘I am a neuro-surgeon, I don’t give medical advice for free’ in seven languages.

Most of the time Stephen didn’t waste a second thinking about Jason’s backstory. It wasn’t bad. A boyfriend who didn’t want Stephen to meet his family and who wasn’t scarred from bad experiences. Despite his lack of memories Jason definitely had personality and was so shockingly smart as if he had lived several lives. Jason himself didn’t talk about his emotions concerning his memory loss and Stephen was perfectly happy with the situation as if was now.

Things only got complicated after they had started sleeping with each other. Well, the sex wasn’t the problem, it was anything but and their relationship didn’t change at all after they rolled around in Stephen’s sheets. The problem, if one could call it a problem, came a bit later. They were at Stephen’s place, lying in bed. Stephen was reading an article about a new operation technique and Jason was right next to him, his nose buried in some Arabic novel.

It was right there that Stephen realised that the missing pieces maybe mattered after all. Or at least how Jason felt about them. The reason was simple. Stephen felt like in a cocoon of perfect contentment. It was warm, cosy and Stephen had no desire whatsoever to get out of it again. This was good. Stephen wouldn’t mind if things were going to stay this way. Putting the magazine away Stephen observed Jason for a couple of moments, unable to not notice how quickly he could read. When he finally felt Stephen’s eyes on him Jason lowered the book, a little too fast, then smiled at him. A little cheeky. “What are you thinking about, Doctor Strange?”

“Not what you are thinking about.” Stephen shook his head, but returned the smile. “Would you mind if I asked you about the memory loss?”

A bit bewildered Jason started to frown, but nodded at the same time. “Sure. I am just a little bit concerned that you’re actually asking for permission.”

“It’s not... I was wondering.” Damn, hopefully Jason was going to appreciate the effort that this took Stephen. “You are a fiercely independent person. Sometimes you like to whine, but you perfectly capable of taking care of yourself and I have trouble thinking of a scenario that would overwhelm you.”

“Doctor Strange, are you trying to make me blush? I am not used to that kind of praise.”

“I am not praising, I am pointing out things. Anyway...” Stephen licked his lips, hoping that he would get the message across. “I like that you are like that. I like that you are the kind of person who... if you were to call me in the middle of the night to get rid of a body, you wouldn’t plead for help in a complete panic, but you would already have a plan where to put it and how to not attract any attention. All you needed is an extra pair of hands.”

A lot of people would have been weirded out by that comparison, but Jason started laughed and leaned a little closer. “Yeah, I probably would have a plan. Would you help me though?”

“Not the point. What I meant is... I know that you are tough and I like it that way, but I was wondering if you ever felt like... Was there ever a moment when you didn’t know what to do anymore? Three years ago? I know what you are happy with the life that you have now and I get why, you’re doing good for yourself. Do you sometimes think about what life must have been like for you? Three years ago.”

Stephen wasn’t sure what he expected, but he knew that there were several appropriate reactions. Silence. Hesitation. Denial. Refusal. Everything. Jason decided to sigh, then hinted at a smile.

“Not really. Sure, there were one or two nights when I was staring at the ceiling, wondering what might become of me, but I kinda always knew that I could get out of this. I only had to take care of myself and I did that. To answer your second question... No, I don’t think about what my life has maybe been like.”

“Why not?”

“Because I feel that...” Jason exhaled through his nose and sent Stephen a somewhat shy grin. “You will hate what I have to say since you never decide anything with your gut.”

“Try me.”

Now there was the hesitation, but Jason eventually nodded. “I can’t explain why, but I feel like... that it’s better if I don’t remember. That there is nothing for me in my past. Nothing for me to go back to.”

Stephen could hear in his voice that there was more to say, that Jason felt more strongly about this than he wanted to let on. He wasn’t going to push though, he had already learned more than he had thought he would. “That’s completely okay. I just wanted to know.”

“That’s also okay.” Jason put his book on the nightstand, before crawling over Stephen and kissing him. For a second Stephen’s mind once more registered how strong Jason was, then he simply enjoyed what was happening to him.

Ordinary life

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

More discoveries and Jason begins to ask questions about himself

Have fun :D

“Do you want my opinion as a professional? I can translate everything that he is saying, but I’ll do a quick summary. He says that everybody in this room is going to be extremely bored for the entire evening and by the end I’ll probably pierce my brain with this ridiculously shiny fork.”

Stephen snorted, trying to swallow down a laugh and glanced at Jason who was tapping his fingers against the table top, showing off completely unashamed that he was annoyed and already bored out of his mind. “For some reason I doubt that he mentioned you personally.”

“Oh, I swear he did. He said that incredibly attractive guy at table 4. By the way I hate you so much for dragging me here. I could be at home, eating fries or watching Netflix. Or go to the MET or watch Shakespeare or going to the dentist. Pretty much everything but this.”

Sometimes Stephen wondered how he could stand Jason’s theatrics. Probably because he knew that at least 50% was show and for the other people at their table. Jason enjoyed fancy banquets and galas, but he detested speeches and boredom. It needed to be said though that Jason got bored a lot quicker than most people.

“You know what I really love about you? How supportive you are. Your partner receives an award and you are here with him without complaining about the food or the entertainment.”

“The wine is fantastic though, I’ll give you that.” Jason raised his glass and took a big sip while Stephen hid his smile. He wasn’t going to say it out loud, but Jason wasn’t completely wrong. These events were dull, but Stephen wasn’t going to miss out on a huge room full of doctors telling him how amazing he was. He was a big fan of the truth.

Jason was surprisingly silent for the next 15 minutes before he started to whine again, completely unbothered by the discomfort of the other people. “Let me guess? They’re waiting to the last second to give you that stupid badge.”

“Best comes last.” Stephen shot him a smirk and Jason moaned exaggeratedly. “My boyfriend dedicates his life to the creation of new nerve cells which is quite a noble thing. So why do I have to suffer for it?”

“Bad karma?”

“Oh, amnesia jokes. Very funny.” Jason playfully narrowed his eyes at him before poking his food with his fork. Truth to be told, Stephen would have been bored himself if Jason hadn’t been there. At least until he got his award. A big thank you, a quick speech and a lot of enjoyment when he watched the other people rolling around in their envy. Those little moments made life worth living.

Back at his table Stephen got a short kiss and Jason whispered wickedly into his ear. “I would tell you how proud I am, but I think you are already proud enough of yourself.”

“That might be the case.”

Jason waited about three seconds before speaking up again. “You got your award. Can we leave now?”

Technically there was no reason for them to stay, but there were still a lot of people in this room that Stephen shouldn’t piss off. “No, we’ll sit this one out. Just another 30 minutes. I’ll take you out to dinner tomorrow if you fake a happy face for that time.”

“Half an hour?” Jason stared at him as if Stephen had threatened him with violence. “In that case I have to go to the bathroom.”

So Jason got up and left. Stephen remained where he was, enjoying the silence, the wine and the knowledge of being the best surgeon in this entire room. He got to do that for two entire minutes, then the fire alarm went off and the security personal ushered everybody out. There was no panic, but a lot of confusion and women freezing in their fancy dresses in the cold night air. Stephen looked around, searching for Jason and eventually found him leaning against Stephen’s Porsche. It was not the best time to notice how good he looked in his dark green suit and a sly grin on his lips that stood in sharp contrast to everybody else’s bewilderment. Stephen had a very dark and unsettling suspicion. “Please, tell me you didn’t.”

“I didn’t do what?” Jason feigned complete innocence and Stephen would have fallen for it if he hadn’t been dating him for over a year now. Also, Jason wanted him to know, the expression in his eyes said it all.

“Oh my god...” Running both hands through his hair Stephen forced himself to keep his voice down low, he definitely didn’t need everybody to know that his boyfriend purposely set off the fire alarm. “I can’t believe that you... Dear god, you aren’t a teenager, you are 33 years old!”

Jason cocked his head, causing his hair to fall into his eyes. His smile was perfectly mischievous and Stephen was never going to admit how much he liked it. “Actually we don’t know if I am 33 years old. That is just a guess.”

“I don’t care. You definitely are older than 16!”

“It was so boring!” Jason laughed, almost apologetically while taking a step forward and grabbing Stephen gently by his jacket with both hands. “You can yell at me later. Let’s get out of here and do something fun with the rest of the night.”

They did indeed get in the car and drive off, mostly because Stephen was afraid that somebody was going to show up and arrest Jason at any moment. In the car Stephen was telling him that he was insane and Jason wouldn’t stop giggling. “I don’t know what you are talking about. I didn’t admit to anything.”

“Oh please...”

“I will not admit to setting off the fire alarm, but I will admit to stealing a bottle of that amazing wine.” Reaching back to the backseat Jason grabbed said bottle that he had hidden there and Stephen knew that is was now time to make a decision. Either go crazy on Jason for being an immature idiot or to laugh, because honestly – Stephen wasn’t surprised.

So Stephen laughed and shook his head. At least his life would never get boring.

A good salesman should immediately be able to tell by your appearance if you had money or not. Stephen entered the jewellery store and the pretty blonde woman behind the counter ever so discreetly took a look at his coat, then at his shoes and then walked over with a charming smile on her face. “Good morning, sir. How may I help you?”

“Hello. It’s my boyfriend’s birthday in three weeks and I am fully dedicated to impress him for the very first time.”

“I figure your partner is a person with high expectations?”

Stephen couldn’t help it, he coughed and laughed at the same time. “He is a pain. I make a lot more money than him, but I am 90% sure that he isn’t with me because of that. Nonetheless, he enjoys it a lot that I have tons of it. Which makes it infuriating that whenever I make him a present there is that look on his face... It’s hard to describe. I get him a Bulgari watch and I see that he likes it. He smiles and tells me that it’s amazing, but he still looks at it as if such a precious watch is the most normal thing on earth for him. Which it isn’t, I know that, because my boyfriend suffers from amnesia and his memories only reach back four years. Nevertheless he looks at gold, diamonds and gems as if he has rooms full of them. Which he doesn’t. Therefore I need something to completely blow his mind.”

The saleswoman’s expression made clear that she thought he was crazy, but she had a few very interesting recommendations for him.

Three weeks later Stephen surprised Jason by not taking him out, but ordering in from their favourite Italian place and enjoying the food on the balcony. Stephen was tempted to throw Jason over the ledge when his mouth didn’t drop to the floor as he unwrapped his new cufflinks and bracelet. That was completely unfair, but Stephen liked a good challenge. One day he would swipe Jason off his feet.

“Happy fake birthday by the way.”

Jason smiled sweetly before wrapping his arms around Stephen’s neck. “Thank you. It’s the greatest fake birthday I’ve ever had... but since I’ve only had four that’s not so much of a big achievement.”

“You are a horrible person.”

“Likewise.”

That might be Stephen’s arrogance talking, but there was a good chance that he had the best relationship imaginable.

There was one thing they didn’t tell you when you wanted to become a Doctor. How many damned reports and files you had to update and write. Stephen was begrudgingly writing down an entire novel about his latest patient, trying to get it down as quickly as possible since Jason was waiting for him and like every waiter in New York City knew – Jason wasn’t a very patient person.

Stephen was scribbling down the last words when somebody forcefully grabbed his arm. Before Stephen could even start complaining he realised that it was Billy. One of the few nurses who could actually do their job. “I am so sorry, Doctor Strange, but Doctor Palmer said that your partner is here. She needs him! Urgently!”

That was new and Stephen knew better than to ask questions when Billy was in panic mode and delivered a message from Christine. She knew not to bother him unless it was an emergency. “Jason is in the waiting room.”

Billy breathed a quick ‘Thank you’ before running past Stephen. Actually running. Running was a terrible sign in a hospital. With a horrible feeling sitting in the pit of his stomach Stephen rushed after them when Billy led Jason down the hospital floors, his boyfriend sending him a concerned glance.

Obviously Billy hadn’t told Jason what they needed him for and Stephen wanted to rip him and Christine apart when they finally reached the room that they had been running to.

Jason most definitely shouldn’t be here. He should be anywhere but here.

There was yelling, lots of it and Stephen only understood half of it. What he understood very well though was the gravity of the situation. Two members of the hospital security were pointing their guns at an evidently confused and highly agitated individual. He had an arm wrapped around a nurse, pressing a scalpel to her neck while shouting in some foreign language. The guards were also yelling, telling him to let her go, to put the scalpel down and Stephen’s throat tightened almost too much for him to breathe when he saw the terror on the nurse’s face. Blatant fear caused by this deranged person.

And Billy had dragged Jason right into this.

Before Stephen got the chance to grab Jason and got him away, Christine was already talking to Jason. Her face was white as chalk. “... woke up and attacked her. We don’t know his identity and we have no idea what language he is speaking. Can you understand anything that he’s saying? We need someone to talk him down.”

They wouldn’t be able to talk Stephen down. Jason shouldn’t be here! He had nothing to do with this. He was a UN interpreter who translated all day the boring nonsense that politicians and diplomats threw in each other’s faces. Jason didn’t do this madness here.

So why wasn’t Jason running away like any sane person would. Instead he took a step forward, past the guard and Stephen couldn’t do this. “Jay, get back!”

Ignoring him Jason spoke up with a firm and demanding voice. In a language that Stephen didn’t know. The man flinched as if Jason had hit him, blinked in confusion and Stephen saw the tears running down the nurse’s face. Then he yelled back and Stephen didn’t want this attention on Jason.

How could he keep his face so stoic and continue talking? Almost as if he wasn’t afraid at all. Perhaps he wasn’t. With Jason it was sometimes hard to tell.

Looking back Stephen thought that the whole ordeal hadn’t taken longer than five minutes. There was Jason talking, with that beautiful voice of his and a face cold as stone. Finally the man dropped the scalpel, the guards handcuffed him and the nurse fled the room sobbing. Stephen released a long breath and swallowed down the taste of bile. Jason was just standing there and a shaking Christine touched his arm. “Thank you... I am so sorry I had to ask you to help.”

“And you should be.” Stephen muttered which earned him a dark glance from Jason. “It’s okay. I could help. There was nobody else to do it.”

“Thank you again.” Christine hugged him shortly before asking him what language the other one

had spoken.

“Tajik.”

“Since when are you able to speak Tajik?”

“I am not. I can babble in Turkish, so I tried that. Can we get out of here now? They are going to give our reservation away.”

They weren’t a very touchy couple and Stephen thanked god for that every day, but he couldn’t stop himself from hugging Jason tightly as soon as they were out of the room. Over dinner Jason didn’t talk much, but didn’t seem very different than usual. He still annoyed the waiter and complained about the traffic when they drove home.

Stephen was completely beat when his head hit his pillow and all he wanted was to sleep. Within a few moments he was already dozing off when he more felt than heard Jason shifting closer.

“Stephen.”

“Hmm?” There was a hint of seriousness in Jason’s voice, but Stephen let his eyes remain closed.

“I want to tell you something and although I love your sarcastic remarks, I don’t need them right now.”

That sounded way too important for Stephen’s taste. “I don’t give any guarantees.”

“Good enough.” Jason mumbled and Stephen kept lying with his back to him, threatening to drift back off to sleep.

“I lied at the hospital. The man was speaking Tajik and so was I.”

And here was Stephen, thinking it would be something serious. “One more language to add to your insane resume.” Stephen had stopped counting a long time ago.

Jason continued to talk. “I’ve never heard a word of Tajik before. Not until today.”

Stephen yawned softly, burying his face in his pillow. “That’s how you are always discovering that you are speaking another language that you didn’t know of.”

Now there was silence for a few seconds and Stephen thought that this had been it.

“I speak every language.”

“Huh?”

“I understand everything anyone is saying. I haven’t found a single language that I don’t speak. I don’t have any trouble remembering words. It’s all completely natural. I speak every god damned language in the world.”

Rolling around Stephen uttered a soft laugh, cracking one eye open to only make out Jason’s shape in the darkness. “Aren’t you just a horrible show-off?”

“I’m not joking here. I speak every language on this planet and that shouldn’t be possible.”

Sighing softly Stephen reached out to touch Jason’s hair on the left side of his head where it was cut short. “Come on, humbleness or reason doesn’t sit well with you. You are a genius in linguistics. You were probably raised bilingual or talking even more languages and you’ve spent

your whole life doing nothing else but studying languages. You are a genius and you know it. That's all there is to it."

"Every god damned language, Stephen."

"Trick question, Jay. Have you actually heard every single language that exists in this world? Every dialect?"

Another pause and then Jason sighed. "No, I haven't."

"There. Now stop worrying about being too smart." To emphasize his point Stephen pressed a small kiss on Jason's forehead. "Try to go to sleep... you did something very brave today and if you ever do something like that again, I will lock you up in this apartment like a caveman."

"Don't even say. I could take you in a fight."

That was definitely true.

It might sound clichéd and awkward, but there wasn't really anything that Stephen would want to change about Jason. His mood-swings were slightly annoying sometimes, but since they both were afraid of boredom and the ordinary, it was perfectly fine with both of them.

Stephen was pretty sure that there was nothing that Jason wanted to change about himself. Not even the most memories. Another cliché – without the invasion or the memory loss they would have never met. Jason was the kind of person who was perfectly content with everything about themselves.

Therefore Stephen was rather surprised when Jason came home from the gym and was staring at himself in the mirror for a long time. Somewhat amused Stephen stepped behind him, putting his chin on Jason's shoulder. "What is it? Did George finally talk you into an inferiority complex?"

"No, I..." Shaking his head Jason met Stephen's eyes. "Something weird happened to me today."

Jason's definition of weird was a lot wider than most people's so Stephen felt intrigued. "I am listening."

"George has been wanting me to use something else than just the treadmill for a long time. I always told him that I have no interest in pumping iron."

"Muscles are overrated. That's my opinion as a doctor."

"Yes, but today... he talked me into it. So I lay down on the bench and pushed up whatever weight that he handed me. He kept adding new ones and it felt like pretty much nothing. You should have seen his face. His was in complete shock, so I eventually told him that it was too much, but it wasn't... It still felt like nothing."

Chuckling softly Stephen kissed Jason's cheek. "So you found out that you are really strong?"

"Stephen..." Jason sighed, leaning back against him. "It was a bit more than that..."

Ignoring the last statement Stephen turned Jason around and kissed him shortly. "Next time just keep doing what you like. Like you always do."

Jason hummed softly before nodding and the conversation was over. It wasn't the only weird talk

they had that day though. Summer was approaching quickly and Jason liked to spend the evenings on the big balcony. Stephen agreed with the sentiment, especially if a good glass of wine was involved. They stayed outside for a couple of hours before Stephen started to feel cold and returned back inside. Jason stayed where he was for another hour and Stephen told him that he was going to bed.

That was also the place where Stephen woke up alone. Checking his phone told him that it was past three am. “Damn... what is he doing now?”

Jason was still on the balcony, lying in his deckchair, only clad in jeans and a t-shirt. “What are you still doing here? You must be freezing.”

“I am not.”

“Alright, tough guy. Come on, you need to get some sleep.”

“I am not done yet.”

“Done with what?”

“Looking at the stars.”

“This is Manhattan. It’s way too bright to see a star.”

“That’s not the point.”

Sighing deeply Stephen sat down next to him. “Okay. Tell me what’s going on, because you’ve been acting a bit weird lately. Weirder than usual.”

“Nothing that your brain which rejects everything that isn’t totally logical could ever understand.” Jason didn’t intent this to sound mean and Stephen wasn’t upset. They had this talk before, Stephen was a rational person through and through and Jason... was different.

“Try me.”

A hand grabbed Stephen’s hand and Jason pulled him down to lie next to him. The deckchair was too small for them, but Stephen wasn’t going to complain.

“There are a lot of things about me that the two of us just don’t think about. If we did, we wouldn’t be so... at ease.”

“Then why should we should think about them?”

“Because by now there are just too many things...” Jason closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against Stephen’s shoulder. “Do you remember when I turned up at the hospital? Christine said it herself. Every bone in body has been broken and has healed again. Way better than they should have. I haven’t been sick one time during the last four years. I understand and speak every language you can name and as it turns out I can lift 200 pounds without breaking a sweat. Does that make a lot of sense to you?”

No, nothing about this entire monologue made sense to Stephen. “Jay... I know that you’ve said that you don’t want to know about your past, but if you changed your mind, then we can look into it. Find out where you come from.”

“That’s the problem, Stephen, I don’t want to know, because sometimes I think that... that I came

from there." Jason pointed to the sky. "With them."

Weird and useless

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

As we know a lot of bad stuff happens in Stephen's life, we need to get to it eventually :)

This was going to be a long night and Stephen knew that he should have stayed in bed. Now the conversation had already started and Stephen could do what he did best. Make matters worse. Jason was pretty much begging for it when he was so unreasonable despite his intellect. "I don't like it when you are implying things. What are you trying to imply? That you aren't human?"

Jason looked at him. That was all he did. More wasn't necessary since he had that ridiculously expressive face. Not to mention those eyes. Right now they annoyed the hell out of Stephen. "Okay. This is stupid."

"It's something worth considering."

His boyfriend was brilliant in so many domains and Stephen definitely didn't want to talk to him like to his interns. "Fine, I'll say the sentence that I never expected to use in this relationship. Jay, you are definitely human."

"Stephen..."

"No, I am not going to let you say anything else, because I might lose my mind hearing you say something like that again. As you know, I am a doctor, so you will get my expert opinion on this case. I have examined and touched every single part of your body. You are human. Also, I have seen your x-rays. Spinal cord, spleen, heart, brain, it's all there. So can you stop now and tell me what is really going on?" Stephen put his hand on Jason's side in a somewhat reassuring gesture.

There had to be something else behind it, he couldn't accept Jason having such dense thoughts.

"Alright... and what about my injuries? That you have no idea of how they could heal so perfectly? I've never felt any consequences. If you hadn't told me, I would have never had any idea if you hadn't told me." Jason was still trying to push it and Stephen hated the fact that he had no good answer. "Fine, alright. I will admit that there are some things in your history that don't add up. How you ended up at the hospital is a complete mystery, but you were in bad shape. Broken bones had healed, but you hadn't seen enough sunlight in a long time. You were way too skinny. Not in a cute way. You were malnourished and that combined with the physical wounds... Christine thought that you might have been imprisoned in some cellar by a maniac or a criminal. That should worry you. Not some silly idea that you aren't human."

It was a mean punch in the stomach, but Stephen knew that Jason could take it and it was necessary. "None of that makes any sense and..." Jason groaned and ran both hands through his hair in frustration. Then he shook his head and got up to his feet. "Why did I try to talk to you anyway? It was clear that you wouldn't understand."

“Because you’re coming up with stupid ideas. Maybe George was only messing with you at the gym and about your language skills – you are an immensely gifted person. I don’t get your problem. You think humbleness is an overrated waste of time, just like me. So why are you suddenly questioning the fact that you are fantastic at something?” Sitting up Stephen shot Jason a somewhat reproachful glance and Jason shrugged. “Because nothing makes sense about me as long as you assume that I am just like everybody else. It doesn’t add up. You just never questioned that. You like it that things are easy.”

“That never was a problem before, Jay.”

What happened next was nothing that Stephen could have ever been prepared for. Jason and him fought. Sure, every couple did that once in a while. A couple like them, composed of two stubborn know-it-alls who also happened to be alpha males, fought with passion and sometimes for days. Nothing new. Stephen could deal with Jason yelling at him. That had happened before hundreds of times. Not quite like this though.

Jason went from normal volume to yelling in one second. “That is not my name!”

To say Stephen had been thunderstruck would have been an exaggeration. None of this had ever been present or hinted at during the last year. No mild tune humming in the background. This was new. So unexpected that Stephen needed a moment to gather up some words. “Yes, I know. It’s the name you chose. The name you’ve been perfectly happy with during the last four years. Where is this coming from now?”

Whatever had happened – it had put Jason in frenzy. He wasn’t moving around when he was angry. No, he was rooted to one spot, but he talked with his hands and his burning eyes were doing the rest. “Perhaps it has been a problem the entire time! Maybe you just didn’t realise it!”

Yeah, Stephen wasn’t having any of that. Jason was indeed persuasive, he was aware of that, but he would have to do a lot better if he wanted to make Stephen feel bad for something that had never been an issue.

“You gotta try harder than that. We don’t celebrate your birthday. We celebrate your fake-birthday. You make jokes about not knowing your real age and that’s not some cover-up to try and hide how you really feel. Until today you didn’t care! Or at least it didn’t upset you!”

“Why am I even wasting my time?” Jason mumbled to himself and then suddenly made his way back into the apartment. “I’m sleeping at my place tonight!”

Oh, that was also new. Jason was more the ‘I’ll make you sleep on your own couch’ kind of guy. “Jay, if you think I’m going to beg you to stay, then you’re wrong.”

A door was already being slammed shut and Stephen sighed. Alright. Fine. What a jerk.

“… then he left. It’s even worse than that one time when we talked about religion.” It was two days later, Jason hadn’t called, Stephen definitely wouldn’t call first and now he was in a miserable mood. Why was he telling Christine all of this? Stephen had no idea, especially since he already knew that she wasn’t going to agree with him.

No, Stephen was even getting that half-disappointed, half-angry gaze. What a mistake, he should have remained silent.

“It amazes me every single time how little empathy you have. Even with your own partner.”

“I don’t see what I did wrong. He can’t expect me to accept it that he changes all the rules within one single night. What is the appropriate reaction when somebody tells you that he thinks he is an alien?”

Christine took a deep breath as if she was trying to get ready for a lecture. One that Stephen wasn’t looking forward to. “He doesn’t really believe that and you know it. I’ve been wondering for quite some time when he was finally going to start asking questions about himself. He wants to know who he is. That can’t really be that surprising to you?”

Yes, it could. “Jason knows who he is. He is smart, cunning, a bit of a jerk. He drinks his coffee black, he likes spending an entire Sunday on his couch, but hates people who never live their flat. He doesn’t have taste in music, he listens to everything. Which is incredibly annoying. He sleeps like a stone and he always has cold feet. No allergies and he can ride on a rollercoaster an entire day without getting sick. He is a snob and he starts rubbing his hands when he feels uncomfortable...”

“That is a large summary of what you know about Jason. Which is all good, but he doesn’t have any memory of his childhood, doesn’t remember experiences that should have marked his life. It is completely natural that he longs to have them back... or at least to think about them. I understand that he gets mad if you ignore that.”

It wasn’t like Stephen didn’t understand the principle. It just didn’t fit. “I would get it if until now Jason had felt like half a person or like something was missing. Nothing was missing until yesterday. I know that, because I would have noticed if my boyfriend had been pretending the entire time. Things were great as they were.”

“Sure, because you hate baggage and you found a guy with no baggage at all. With no nothing. No bad experiences or memories. Nothing. He can’t stay like that because it’s comfortable for you.”

This was going too far now and Stephen let her know it. “I don’t believe that you really think that of me.”

“You are right. I don’t. I am sorry for implying that you didn’t care about him. I know you do.”

“Exactly. You know the statistics just as well as I do. It’s been four years. He is not going to remember. Also, whatever happened to him before the invasion should be better left in the dark. It would only rip up wounds he doesn’t even know that he has. Jason is a beautiful, healthy, successful person. In a relationship with the best surgeon in the world. He is doing pretty damn good. Why change anything about that?”

Christine gave him a soft smile. “Because it’s only part of his story.”

“But it’s definitely the best part.”

“Is it so hard for you to say that you are worried that there is something in his past that he might want to go back to? He will understand. Just tell him. Perhaps it’s exactly what he wants to hear.”

Knowing Jason that might just be the case. Stephen wasn’t going to admit though, so he just shrugged, ignored Christine’s knowing smirk and then swore to himself that he wasn’t going to call Jason first. Time to play a round of their favourite game. Who could be more stubborn?

When Stephen got home after his shift he was hoping against hope to find Jason sitting on the couch. Jason coming back didn’t mean that everything would be fine, but Stephen somehow missed his patronizing gaze like he was graciously forgiving Stephen when there was nothing to

forgive in the first place. Not that Stephen had to worry about that since Jason wasn't here.

Stephen put on some jazz before collapsing in his favourite chair with a novel in his hands. No, he wasn't going to lose this game. Not going to happen.

They kept this going for two days and the satisfaction of not being the first to call was running thin pretty soon. Eventually Stephen talked himself into having to do something before Jason got obsessed with the idea of coming from another planet. Stephen couldn't believe that this was his life. Reluctantly Stephen grabbed his phone and dialled Jason's number. His call wasn't answered and Stephen wasn't going to him. No way.

Exact 50 minutes later Stephen was standing in front of Jason's door, feeling defeated and small, but now he wasn't going to turn around. He was going to save face in the following conversation. The door was being opened and Jason raised an eyebrow at Stephen. "Did you get lost?"

"No, I got annoyed by the current state of things. Can I come in and we talk about it like adults?"

"Adults? Us?"

Damn, now Jason had him smiling. Bad start if they were still going to fight. "Well, we could at least try?"

Despite pulling a face Jason made a step inside and let Stephen enter. They settled down in the living room and Stephen was glad that he got offered a glass of water. "I am not going to apologize since I have nothing to apologize for."

"Me neither. Good talk."

Groaning Stephen rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes. "Okay, let's start over. I got a question and I need a frank answer. Do you really believe that you came with the invasion?"

Once more it wasn't possible to entirely keep the scorning tone out of his voice, but Jason wasn't better at this anyway.

"I don't know. Is it that impossible? We live in a world that has gone through an alien invasion. An evil AI has tried to take over the world and there was this guy who could make people do whatever he said. Is it that unbelievable that I could be weird too?" It happened rarely that Jason said something without a smirk, without sarcasm or even without a smile. Now his voice was completely even and Stephen got slightly worried. "Listen, Jay. You're wicked smart. That doesn't make you weird."

Jason crossed his arms in front of his chest, his eyes darting around unsurely. "I don't get cold."

"What?"

"I don't get cold. Never. That is weird."

Stephen had to laugh. "That's simply not true. Your feet are made of ice. I wake up all the time, because you touch me with your stone-cold feet."

"They don't feel cold to me." Jason muttered and Stephen decided to go for Christine's strategy now. "Is this really about you thinking you are weird or did you change your mind about not wanting to know about your past? Cause that would be okay and honestly... easier to deal with."

"Oh, great Doctor Strange, I am so sorry for being an inconvenience for you."

Wonderful, one step forward, one thousand backwards.

“I didn’t say that, but yeah, I enjoyed this relationship more when you were still thinking that you were the greatest thing ever happening to this world.”

“It’s not about what enjoy or not!”

“Good, because I definitely do not enjoy you coming up with nonsense to ignore or to not deal with what really happened to you.”

“Go on, enlighten me! What happened to me?! Where am I coming from?! Share you limitless knowledge me with!”

By now this had ended up in a shouting match and since Stephen already knew that he would leave here with them still fighting, he could easily make matters worse. “You are not that special, Jay! That’s the main issue here! The amnesia doesn’t really matter anymore, because you have a good life. You are great at what you do, you place is nice, you get along with your colleagues, you have friends, you are in a relationship and your idiot of a boyfriend thinks that you are amazing. You are not the train wreck that you were four years ago. There is no reason to pity you. Nobody gives a damn about your past. You became an average guy and you can’t take that.”

“Average?” Jason spat out that word and Stephen had touched a nerve without being in the OR.

“Obviously...”

Shaking his head Jason turned around, his shoulders were shaking. “Fuck you, Stephen Strange. Get out. I don’t want to see your face anymore.”

“Then I guess it’s the wrong moment to remind you that I’m going to speak at the dinner of the American Neurological Association tomorrow and three weeks ago you promised me to come along.”

“Stephen, get out!”

They both knew there was no point in continuing this conversation, so Stephen left and promised himself that next time Jason had to be the one coming to him. He should be right about that, but he would have preferred Jason showing up at his apartment. Not next to Stephen’s hospital bed.

Technically every doctor knew that every condition that he had studied and sworn to fight could one day decide to get a hold of him. Maybe except for some nasty genetic diseases that just didn’t run in the family. Anything else could hit you at any time. Stephen was a brilliant doctor, so he knew all of that. Unfortunately it didn’t change a thing.

The pain in every single one of his bones didn’t come less real or more bearable. Lying in this bed Stephen didn’t feel like he still had a body. Those limbs couldn’t be his. Broken and without any use. Except for the pain that they mercilessly bestowed on him. There wasn’t much left of Stephen Strange.

His mind was still working though. Something that Stephen came to mourn. All of his brilliance in combination with his eyesight left no room for doubt. They had let a butcher work on him and that guy had done the only thing that he was capable of. He had ruined him. Had left his hands crushed and scarred. Useless.

What really broke him were Jason's perfectly healthy, strong hand on his shoulder and his soft, choked whisper. "It's going to be fine."

If Stephen had had the strength he would have yelled at Jason. He was never going to be fine again. Not a single second. Stephen's career and life were over. He was a cripple, incapable of holding anything between his fingers without trembling fiercely. Gentle words or support couldn't change that.

Inoperable. Sure. Because none of them was any good. Their abilities didn't compare to what Stephen could do. All of them were butchers and Stephen was left with them. Useless.

When he got to finally leave the hospital Jason was around him 24/7. Three entire weeks Jason refused to go to work, since he had to take care of Stephen. Ensuring Stephen's direct way into madness. The last thing he needed was Jason pained and pitiful gaze on him. All the time. Even worse – for the first time in their relationship Jason showed signs of patience.

Stephen's ruined hands couldn't hold a cup of coffee, it crashed down and spilled the black liquid everywhere. Jason smiled, muttered that he would be taking care of it and then Stephen shouldn't worry. For a second Stephen thought about stabbing him with one of the shards. Jason wasn't patient, Jason was easily annoyed and made fun of people before ultimately helping them. His presence was driving insane and frankly – he had already enough to deal with. Finding a way to get his hands back.

It was day 22 when Stephen swiped everything off the kitchen table and screamed at Jason. That he couldn't stand his sight anymore and that he should go to work or Stephen couldn't guarantee for anything. So Jason finally left the apartment and Stephen continued to look for a way out of his personal hell.

Weeks turned into months and nothing changed. Stephen remained a useless cripple with a severe lack of sleep as his best friend. How could he sleep when he still hadn't found a solution yet? Stephen had been born to work in the OR, so right now he was nothing.

At least Jason's obnoxiously gentle and soothing words had become less and less. Most of the time he wasn't saying anything at all. Stephen should have known that it was the silence before the storm.

Étienne refused to help him, like every other surgeon. None of them was willing to take the risk and Stephen was torn apart by anger and fear of staying this way for the rest of the life. Undignified and useless. Stephen buried his head in his hands as Étienne ended the call and he felt somebody touching his shoulder.

"It's time to stop, Stephen. It's enough."

There it was again. That gentle tone which had nothing to do with Jason. He could have driven needles under Stephen's finger nails, it would have the same effect. "I haven't found a solution yet."

"There is no solution to find... Stephen, you have to come to terms with what happened. You cannot go on denying reality. You're ruining yourself..."

Jason had more to say. More nonsense that Stephen didn't want to hear. So he shook off Jason's hand. "No, I was ruined by a second-class surgeon who had no business operating on me."

"He saved your life."

“What life?! Oh, am I supposed to be thankful?! The one thing that defines me was taking away from me and I should be grateful? There is nothing left of me and you think I should be glad?!”

“There is still a lot of you left. You are more than your hands. You cannot go on like this. Me neither...”

Stephen let out a dry laugh and turned to look at Jason. How he hated him for standing there, being perfectly fine. Beautiful and strong. Jason had no use for him and Stephen despised him for still being here because of pity. “I was waiting until you would make all of this about you.”

“God, damn it, Stephen! I have been trying to... I am trying to help you! I keep running against walls with you. It’s been months! You cannot go on like...”

“Yes, I can and I will. Without you if I have to.”

To be honest Stephen expected a big fight, reproaches, yelling, perhaps even tears of anger. None of that happened. Jason remained silent for a long time, but then he eventually turned around and seconds later Stephen heard the front door being shut.

Magical

Chapter Notes

Hey there,

Stephen gets a new life and tries to reconnect with his old one ;)

Have fun

As Stephen was learning with his back against the closed door of the Kamar-Taj, he couldn't stop thinking about how far he had eventually fallen. About a year ago Stephen had been an immensely successful surgeon with a penthouse in the best neighbourhood of Manhattan. More money on his bank account than he could spend, a fierce passion for what he was doing, a talent that hardly anyone else was blessed with and he had had a smart and beautiful boyfriend.

None of that was left. Now Stephen was sitting in the dirt, pleading to become member of... what exactly? A cult? He didn't know and at this point Stephen also didn't care. What he had seen, what he had felt was a chance to re-become what he had been. To regain the talent which had defined him, which had bestowed his lovely life on him. Which was now one year away from him. Stephen hated the person he had become. He hated the way he looked, he hated how he had become dependent on other people and how he had been reduced to a beggar. Stephen didn't believe a single word that the woman inside of these walls had said, but he couldn't deny what had happened. How he had fallen through tunnels of lights and hallucinations. None of it made sense, but Stephen wanted it.

That's why he would keep sitting here until somebody opened the door for him. No matter how long it was going to take. Slowly his thoughts wandered back to only a few hours ago when the so called Ancient One had stood in front of him. So many words that didn't mean anything, but Stephen had been able to read her gaze. He had seen it before, on the faces of so many surgeons. Intrigue.

What an odd creature you are, Doctor Strange. You deny the very existence of magic and yet you are drenched in it. It is all over you, almost woven into the fabric of your being. Fascinating. How it is faint and so powerful at the same time. Almost confused. Like whoever placed it on you wasn't aware of doing it.

Nonsense. Unfortunately Stephen had tried everything else. This was his last chance at the end of the world and Stephen wasn't going to miss it.

The door was being opened after a sheer endless amount of time, but Stephen was ready for it.

“How's your Sanskrit?”

Until now Stephen had been very successful at refusing to admit to himself that he had been thinking of Jason. Every day at least a little bit. Sometimes just a fleeting second and other days he was suddenly staring into space, wondering what Jason was doing right now. Then a moment later

he shook his head and focused on what he was doing.

That wasn't possible now. Stephen's Sanskrit was non-existent and he couldn't help but thinking about what Jason had said. About speaking every language on this planet. Which obviously wasn't possible, but Stephen was nonetheless convinced that Jason would need less than a week to figure out every single book in this library. Stephen could do the same, he was sure of that... in a lot more time.

That night, instead of practising or reading, Stephen lay awake and looked at the ceiling. Now it has been more than seven months. Seven months without seeing Jason and talking to him. Stephen didn't need to see him to know that Jason was doing perfectly fine. No matter what life may throw into his way, Stephen knew that Jason could jump over it or maybe even use it to his advantage. If there was one thing that Stephen should worry about it was if Jason hadn't gone on a long time ago. A young man who was beautiful, with wits as sharp as a blade and who knew that he deserved better. The way they had parted didn't leave much hope or room for a reunion. Jason had slammed the door shut and at the time Stephen hadn't felt any inclination to reopen it. At the time he hadn't been able to stand the sight of him and Stephen doubted that this had changed yet.

Jason was still that beautiful, intelligent man who hardly had any faults. Stephen was a failure with two hands that wouldn't stop shaking. Yet all of that had nothing to do with the way he missed Jason. His bite, his impatience and their endless, sometimes mean conversations. Who was he kidding, their conversations were always mean and sarcastic. Stephen probably missed that most, talking to him. Although he had to admit that their last conversations had been anything but pleasant. Stephen had made both of them miserable.

Sighing Stephen made a quick decision and got up before he had the chance to change his mind again. Nonetheless he didn't get further in his email than 'Dear Jason'. Even that greeting was so terribly non-fitting. But what else was Stephen supposed to write?

Jason

My dearest Jason

Hello to the man I've shared my bed and life with

I am sorry

Meaningless phrases before Stephen had even tried to tell him so many things that he couldn't say. Therefore he closed the laptop and slid back into bed, trying to pretend that he didn't know exactly what he would immediately do if he already mastered the ability of creating a portal.

Stephen's lungs were burning as the cold had already started to eat it away. Even now back in the security of the Kamar-Taj Stephen was still in pain. Not only physically.

Jason's words were ringing in his ears. *I don't get cold*

Such a stupid remark. Everybody got cold, it was a simple fact. Too much time spent in the cold led to death. Stephen would have died in the Himalaya and so would have Jason. Because everybody got cold.

Except maybe for the Ancient One, but Stephen had more and more doubts about her being human. Eventually he would ask her about it, Stephen knew that, but until now he still busy trying to figure himself out.

He should feel better about the portal that he had created. Stephen definitely should.

Tonight he sat down at his laptop and finally typed an email to a person that belonged to his former life. It was short and didn't actually say anything. Stephen knew that it was ridiculous. Seven months ago he dropped from the edge of the world, people might as well think that he was dead. That mail wasn't nearly enough, but it was the best that he could do.

The next time Stephen checked his computer Christine had already written back. Another strange message that was more or less a mixture of reproaches and relief that he wasn't lying dead in some back alley. Except for the end. The end was undisguised bitterness.

I cannot believe you did not even ask about him, because I know for a fact that you did not contact him

Biting his lip Stephen had to accept that his plan had completely failed. He had had the ridiculous hope that Christine would start to give away some details about Jason on her own, so he would not have to ask about him. Of course Christine had looked through him and now Stephen was once more staring at his laptop, not knowing what to do.

Which resulted in him doing nothing.

Stephen was sitting in the patio, reading a book when he felt somebody walking up to him. A presence that overshadowed everything else. No need to turn around, he already knew that the Ancient One was behind him. She didn't say anything, so Stephen kept reading the book without taking in a single word.

Back in his real life Stephen hadn't had a problem with being watched. Quite the opposite. Stephen had always gotten a kick out of students or interns following him around with their eyes, completely unable to hide how awestruck they were. Those situations could hardly be compared though.

Minutes passed and Stephen was starting to feel uncomfortable from the Ancient One staring holes into his back. Finally she started talking to him, but it didn't improve anything.

“It is rather remarkable. So much time that you've spent here and so much you have learned. During all that time you have worn that foreign magic as a necklace. Normally it should have faded by now, but it is just as strong as the moment I have first met you.”

Closing the book Stephen glanced at her, but her face was as stoic as ever. “You have said that before, but I don't understand what you mean by that.”

“It is one of these marvellous things that happen every day in our world and sometimes we are lucky enough to witness them. I do not see myself capable of explaining it. Especially since you were a fierce sceptic when you arrived here. You carry a strong presence of magic with you which can only be explained if you have spent a long period of time in the company of magic. It's outstanding. I have never seen that kind before. Fragile and potent at the same time. Almost as if it is unaware of itself.”

Stephen wasn't even going to start pretending that he had any idea what she was talking about, but he had learned that usually the Ancient One's words had some meaning to it. “I guess I am very special then.”

The Ancient One hinted at a smile before simply turning around and leaving him alone again. As

usual Stephen didn't know what to make of this.

Stephen once more realised how much his life had changed within one year. His whole idea of the world had changed, he knew now about things that he had laughed off in the past, he was a practitioner of the mystic arts and today Stephen had been stabbed in the heart.

Honestly, he had no idea if his life had changed for the better. Probably not. Definitely not, judging by the look on Christine's face when he shortly explained things to her after she had saved his life. The poor woman had to loathe him. One year not a single word, then he showed up with a stabbed wound at the hospital and revealed things to her that she could have happily lived without. She definitely thought he was crazy, although the portal in the cabinet gave him a lot of credibility.

Before he stepped through it Christine gave him a sad look. "You should go see him. He deserves an explanation and an apology."

Suddenly Stephen felt so ashamed that there was indeed nothing he could say. All he could do was to kiss her on the cheek as a 'thank you for saving my life' and then step through the portal. Thinking once more about what Jason was doing right now.

It took the end of the world for Stephen to admit that he indeed wanted to seek Jason out or to just see him. Make sure that he was doing alright, that Stephen hadn't done any permanent damage. Unfortunately it was the end of the world and there was a good chance that both of them would die without ever exchanging words again. Stephen really didn't want that... besides the end of all life on their planet.

As a consequence he had to kick Dormammu's ass, because Stephen had an important meeting ahead of him.

After successfully bargaining with Dormammu Stephen didn't have to worry anymore about the world ending. Therefore he had about one million new worries. For example the responsibility for the Sanctum Sanctorum. Something he had never wanted. One year ago Stephen had turned his back on everyone and everything to get his hands back, to become a whole person again. To stop being useless.

Stephen had stopped fitting into his old life and now nobody else could fit into the world he was living in right now. Least of all Jason.

All of that didn't stop Stephen from eventually standing in front of Jason's apartment, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. At least Stephen knew now that he was insane, because the thing that concerned him most at the moment was how Jason would react to the beard.

Perhaps dying a countless number of times had messed with Stephen's mind.

When the door was being opened Stephen realised what a lost case he was since his heart skipped a beat. Seriously? A few days ago he had fought a demon for the fate of this world and now he was nervous about meeting his ex-boyfriend.

Disappointment spread within his body as Stephen looked into the face of a woman he had never seen before. What had he expected? It had been a year.

"Can I help you?"

“Uhm... Hello. I am looking for Jason Lawson.”

“Never heard that name before.”

Disappointment was replaced with relief. “One year ago this was his apartment.”

“I am sorry, but I can’t help you. I’ve only been living here for the past 6 months.”

So Jason had moved and Stephen immediately used that as an excuse for not having to go see him. Although it would be rather easy to find him. Two weeks passed until Stephen found himself standing in front of the UN building. A ridiculous action since Jason wouldn’t just randomly walk out at any time. What would he even say to him? Sorry for leaving one year ago and not calling you one single time, but it’s okay since I have become a sorcerer and can do really cool shit now?

So Stephen turned back around, but back at the Sanctorum he did some old-fashioned research. Jason didn’t live that far away from him. It would be so incredibly easy. Stephen even had the possibility of checking on Jason without him ever knowing about it.

But why should he do that? Stephen wanted to talk to him despite having no idea what to say. Apologizing? There were so many things that Stephen need to apologize for that he probably shouldn’t even get started. So what was the point in it?

Of course Stephen had thought about running into Jason by accident. Had even fantasized about it. Unlikely to happen in such a huge city. Stephen couldn’t rely on that ever happening and then he happened to have a really bad day.

Standing in front of an apartment building without having the guts to even step inside was pitiful, but Stephen didn’t move. He stood there with his hands in his pockets for about half an hour when the front door was pushed open. Not for the first time, so Stephen didn’t pay too much attention. Until he could tell out of the corner of his eye that the way this person moved was very familiar.

Jason was wearing a black hoodie, washed out chino pants and the most neutral expression that Stephen had ever seen. Which was wrong since Jason was anything but not stoic. He hadn’t come down by accident since he didn’t look surprised to see Stephen.

Within a second Stephen knew that it had been a severe mistake not to call him. Stephen should have come sooner.

“You’ve staring at the house for 40 minutes now. Families with little kids live here. People might get the wrong impression.”

“Did you see me from your window?” Because that would mean that Jason’s windows were on this side of the building.

Casually Jason shrugged before crossing his arms in front of his chest. “I pretty much sensed you as soon as you turned around the corner. You’re probably still using the same aftershave.”

There was no open hostility, Jason merely sounded bitter, but perfectly controlled. Stephen didn’t need more to know that he was in deep trouble. He would have preferred Jason yelling at him, spitting poison and venom.

Taking a step towards him Stephen tried to start “Jason...”

“Oh, don’t even start! How long have you been back in the city? Two months? I don’t hear a word from you for one year and when you come back, you tell your ex-girlfriend about it, but not me. So you have no business standing in front of my apartment. I did perfectly fine the last 12 months without you. You are alive. Good for you. The beard looks nice. That’s it. I don’t have anything else to say.”

“Then just listen and let me talk. Things are a little more complicated than what you...”

“Of course they are...” Jason rolled his eyes dramatically and then turned around. He was going to leave now and Stephen just couldn’t accept that. Yes, it was all his fault and he had no right to demand anything. Stephen also knew that sometimes you couldn’t play fair if you wanted to succeed. With two steps he had caught up to Jason and gently touched his arm. “Jay...”

Jason brushed his hand away with a rough gesture. “Don’t!”

Their skin touched. If only for a second. The sensation was similar to pain, like an electric shock and it had Stephen flinching. A simply touch that seemed to pull him from a slumber. The air around Jason was vibrating, buzzing with energy. Like nothing that Stephen had ever felt before. Power. Raw and yet completely tamed. It was everywhere and yet it didn’t touch anything. Not even Jason.

... Like whoever placed it on you wasn’t aware of doing it...

Jason opened his mouth and Stephen knew the look on his face, he was about to start yelling. For some reason though no sound passed his lips and confusion made its way onto his features. “What? Why are you staring at me like this?”

New you

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

So Stephen and Jason have a talk :)

Have fun

“Wong, I need your help.”

The other man nodded softly and watched Stephen with attentive eyes. It had taken Stephen enough time to admit that he wasn’t going to figure this out on his own, so now he would lay it all on the table. “Yesterday I met my ex-boyfriend and... Hey!”

Without saying a word Wong turned away and Stephen growled. “No, it’s not that kind of problem, I swear! Do you really believe that I would discuss my relationship problems with you? There is the internet for that. It’s related to sorcery... I think.”

Still sceptical Wong narrowed his eyes, but made an inviting gesture. “Go on.”

Since Stephen didn’t know where to start, he went all the way back. To the first time he had ever seen Jason. Three days after the invasion. Stephen told the entire story. The injuries and the healing process that couldn’t be explained. Jason claiming to speak every single language on this planet. Him not getting cold. Him believing that there might be something wrong with him. Then yesterday.

“... I could feel it. We were together for over a year and not once did I notice anything. The air all around him was heavy with energy and... I don’t know. It felt like magic and at the same time completely unknown. He asked me what was wrong and I couldn’t tell him, because I still have no idea.” Helplessly Stephen searched Wong’s eyes and the other one seemed completely engrossed in his story. Good, so at least Wong was taking this seriously.

“It would make sense.”

A little bit confused Stephen raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“The Ancient One. It was one of the first things she noticed about you. She could feel a strong presence of magic on you. Magic that wasn’t your own. She was fascinated about its duality. Strong and faint at the same time she called it. In this context it would make sense.”

A severe headache was creeping up on Stephen, thinking back to all the times that they had fought and when he called Jason’s thoughts and fears ridiculous. Should it now turn out that Jason was indeed more than an average person with a horrible case of amnesia? “I am sorry, but how does that make any kind of sense? Is that even possible? Can a... sorcerer or magic user forget that he... has abilities?”

“I am not a doctor. That’s you. Tell me, is it possible to forget simply everything about oneself?”

While gritting his teeth Stephen nodded. Technically that was possible. “You forget what you can do, but that doesn’t change the fact that you can do it... Let’s for one second assume that he really has magic... to some extent. He also forgot about that... How would it be possible for him to leave some that magic on me?”

Now Wong’s expression got even more serious and Stephen didn’t like that one bit. Even with everything that he knew now, looking back he didn’t see anything suspicious in Jason’s behaviour during all the time they had been together.

“The Ancient One couldn’t feel someone else’s magic, because they placed it there. You spent so much time within its presence that it rubbed off on you. It’s like smoke or a certain scent sticking to your clothes. Magic stuck to you, without influencing you in any kind of way. Your ex-boyfriend being the source of this magic makes sense.” Wong explained matter-of-factly and Stephen’s headache got new company in from of a revolting stomach.

“That’s... I’ll be the first one to admit that Jason is extraordinary, but he’s still just... a person. During our entire relationship there was never a moment that made me think that he might be different. He’s...” Stephen stopped, he tried to remember anything, but there was nothing that he couldn’t explain with Jason being incredibly smart. Then something else came to his mind, something much more important and Stephen’s heart skipped a beat. “Wong, if he is a magic user and a powerful one if the Ancient One was right... could it be possible that you know him?”

“I don’t know every single magic user in the world, but there is always a possibility.”

Stephen’s hand was shaking as he held out his phone and showed Wong a photograph of Jason. He was smiling and Stephen missed him terribly.

To his great disappointment Wong shook his head. “No, I haven’t seen him before. That doesn’t mean anything though. Not everybody comes to the Kamar-Taj to learn their abilities.”

“Abilities... He was hurt during the invasion and even before that... He must have been in a fight and...” Stephen’s thoughts were threatening to overwhelm him, they were running in all directions. Jason not being the victim of a crime. What role had Jason had in this fight? Out of a sudden Stephen realised for the second time that he didn’t know anything about Jason. One year ago that hadn’t mattered, because Jason hadn’t known anything about himself either. Stephen had learned the hard way that a person couldn’t simply be a magic user. Magic always had a purpose, people used it for something. Good or bad. Jason must have done the same. Stephen was going to be sick.

“Wong, there is something,...” Stephen took a little breath. “I have never thought about it. During the invasion... was there any kind of magic involved? Was it a threat that concerned the Ancient One?”

His friend showed off his usual serious face and Stephen was a bit scared. “There was nothing supernatural about the Chitauri, the Avengers didn’t need magic to defeat them.”

Before Stephen could release a sigh of relief Wong continued and he suddenly looked concerned. “But I remember the Ancient One talking about a new strong presence entering Earth. Two. One of them was Thor or more precisely his hammer. The other presence came before him, but remained inactive. Then it suddenly... disappeared.”

There was pity in the last word and Stephen ran both hands through his hair. That couldn’t be true. Well, of course, it could. Jason had felt different and Stephen had ignored it, because he hadn’t known better and because he had enjoyed things as they had been.

Where did that leave him now? With the strong suspicion that Jason was a lot more than some unlucky guy who had lost his memory, because he had been hit on the head.

“Let me guess, it’s possible to erase someone’s memory by magic.”

“Yes, it is, but it’s also possible to lose your memory due to a severe trauma. Didn’t you say that’s what happened to him?”

That was right and couldn’t be denied. Stephen had no idea anymore about what might have happened or not. “Okay... then let’s sum this up... My boyfriend might be that magical presence which appeared four years ago... He has no idea himself... and we have also no idea who he actually is or what he might be able to do. Am I supposed to tell him about this?”

Wong was probably the last person on earth who could give him relationship advice, but he did it anyway. “You said that he wanted to know more about himself and that he felt like he came with the invasion. It could be the truth. He deserves to know... and it might be a good way to get back in touch with him what you are so desperately trying to do.”

Stephen’s mouth dropped open and Wong gave him the most sardonic grin he had ever seen. How was he still supposed to think about their non-existing relationship when Jason was a magic user, maybe not human and...

“If he came with the invasion... could he have been part of it?”

“Everything’s possible, but several portals were opened during those days. There is no way of knowing who walked through it and why.”

Jason refused three times to pick up his phone, but eventually wrote back after Stephen’s fourth message. He graciously accepted Stephen’s offer to grab a coffee, but it was still the coldest text that Stephen had ever received. Ultimately that didn’t matter since Jason had agreed to meet him.

Stephen couldn’t remember having ever been that nervous. Not even before facing Dormamuu. Probably because he had known that this meeting would be fatal, the entire world had been at stake. Also, it had already been too late. Stephen hadn’t had anything to lose.

Today it was different. What if he said something wrong, would Jason walk out of his life forever? Jason would leave and they would go on living like that. Stephen didn’t want that. What did he want? First all giving Jason the apology that he owed him and then what? Tell him that Jason maybe indeed wasn’t human and that his smarts and endurance could be explained with magic. Granted, Stephen’s life hadn’t become any easier after becoming familiar with the mystic arts.

Jason was late. Which was definitely not like him, but Stephen knew that he wanted to let him suffer. Even just a little bit. To be honest, Stephen didn’t deserve better.

After 10 long minutes Jason finally entered the little coffee shop and didn’t even blink when his eyes found Stephen. While Jason walked up to him, Stephen took advantage of the situation and watched him a bit more carefully than he had yesterday. Jason’s hair was a bit longer, his eyes attentive and he looked very nice overall. He always had. A clear proof that he didn’t need Stephen to take care of himself.

“Are you going to run away again? Third time is a charm.” Jason sat down opposite of him and his bitterness already threatened to cut off Stephen’s air supply.

“Jay, I am sorry.”

“What for? Yesterday or the last year? It’s hard to keep up with...” Jason had always preferred attack mode to being defensive. Stephen liked that about him. Now it made him uncomfortable. “Jay...”

“No, I don’t get it. You are away for one year. Without saying goodbye. Then you come back, tell Christine that you are here, but you don’t come to me. Except when you do, then you wait in front of my door, but you don’t knock. When I stand in front of you, you stare at me and run away. A single ‘I am sorry’ won’t cut it.”

That was right. Taking a deep breath Stephen nodded. “I know. I was awful to you and I already knew that at the time, but I was so busy with feeling sorry for myself that I couldn’t change anything when I should have. I was completely in the wrong and unfortunately I’ve already committed those mistakes, so all I can do now is telling you that I am sorry. That doesn’t mean that you have to forgive me. I just want you to know that I know that I feel horrible for what I’ve done to you.”

It was fascinating to see how Jason’s features instantly softened although he tried to fight it. For a second that gave Stephen hope, if there weren’t all that new information.

Jason remained silent, his eyes left Stephen’s face to stare at the table top. Stephen gave him time, it would feel wrong to force him to continue the conversation now. Eventually Jason decided to do so anyway. “Alright... it’s about time you admit that you are a jerk.” He was trying to sound especially harsh and then changed his tone immediately anyway. “Your hands look better. How are you doing?”

Stephen couldn’t fight a smile, because it made him feel better that Jason even wanted to know that. “I am better. Thank you for asking. It was... a long way there.”

“Go on. Tell me. I want to know. I don’t know if I care anymore, but I deserve to know where you went.”

Again, a smile, because Jason did care. He wouldn’t have asked if he didn’t. The smile disappeared quickly, because if Stephen was going to explain everything, they would talk about magic and eventually what it had to do with Jason. But Stephen had come here to do exactly that. Jason had a right to know. If there was anything to know.

So Stephen started talking. About his search for a remedy and his journey to Asia. The Kamar-Taj. He hadn’t gone too much into detail when Jason interrupted him with the same assumption that Christine had made. “So you joined a cult.”

“Not quite, it’s a bit more complicated. I guess I had to learn that there are more important and bigger things than me or my hands. I understand that now and I am fine. It’s okay that I will not go back into an OR. There are other things that I can do, more important things.”

Stephen was already trying to find a way out, to not go into detail, but Jason had always had a talent to ask direct and uncomfortable questions. “So what is it that you do now?”

“That’s kind of hard to explain.”

“Go on, explain it to me. Show off, that’s what you do.” The bitterness was still there. Obviously Jason knew that Stephen was keeping things from him. It couldn’t be more evident. That didn’t change the fact that Stephen had no idea how to explain the situation to Jason without him

believing that he was having him on.

Licking his lips Stephen closed his hands around his coffee cup, shortly playing the thought of lying to Jason. No, Jason deserved better and most importantly, Jason wanted to know more about himself and there was a chance that Stephen could offer him answers. “I was introduced into the mystic arts.”

It took Jason less than three seconds to decide what he thought of the situation. “There are only two possibilities. Either you actually joined a cult and they brainwashed you or you are the biggest jerk that ever walked the surface of this earth.”

“Jay...”

“No, you cannot just come back with a completely new personality and expect me to say ‘Alright, cool, let’s go back to where we were one year ago’. Or is that not why you are here? Why are we here, Stephen? You said you’re sorry. Is there something else or can I leave?”

That was the worst case scenario, but definitely not surprising.

“I want to help you to find out who you are and why you felt like you... came with the invasion.”

Leaving Jason speechless had always been a rare occasion and it used to give Stephen a sweet feeling of satisfaction. That didn’t happen this time. Jason was staring at him and Stephen felt tiny, unwanted. Definitely not like the guy who had saved the entire world.

“It’s definitely possibility number two. Just go back wherever you came from, Stephen.” Jason’s green eyes were cold in a way they shouldn’t be and Stephen felt like he was about to panic when Jason got up and turned around to leave.

Quickly Stephen put a few notes on the table and jumped to his feet to follow Jason. Right in front of the door Stephen had caught up with him and carefully grabbed his arm. “Jay, please, I am not making fun of you. You just need to give me a chance to explain.”

Abruptly Jason jerked away from him, glaring at Stephen while he pressed some words through his gritted teeth. “Don’t make me angry. Not in here.”

Stephen didn’t get the opportunity to ask what he meant with that, because Jason stormed out of the door and what other choice did he have than to follow him?

“Stop following me!”

“Then stop running away!”

Jason did just that, spinning around to yell at Stephen. In the middle of the street. It was so like Jason to not care about who might hear or see them. “Running away!? I didn’t run away! You did! For one year! I didn’t need you before we became a couple and I didn’t need you during the year that you were gone! I most definitely don’t need you to find out something that never interested you in the first place!”

“I know... but I believe that I could...”

Stephen had no idea what exactly had pushed Jason over the edge, but it happened with fierce intensity. “I don’t care!”

A frustrated gesture with his hand and the bike that had been leaning against the street light next to

them flew through the air and violently crashed against the brick wall of the house they were standing in front of. Despite everything that Stephen had seen and experienced during the last year all he could do now was standing still and stare. Because this was Jason. Jason who had just created an energy wave strong enough to move a solid object. Without any visible traces of magic. No item to reinforce the power. That been all Jason.

Jason who should be horrified and confused, but who only closed his eyes in frustration.
“Damn...”

“Jay, we really need to talk.”

The answer came slowly and it made Stephen feel so much better. “Alright.”

None of them said a word until Jason closed the door to his apartment behind them. “This is a nice place.”

“Thank you.” Jason muttered under his breath while he took off his jacket. He told Stephen to wait in the living room while he got them two glasses of water. Looking around Stephen saw a lot of familiar things. The same bookshelves and books, but new pictures on the walls. How much he would like to simply sit down and spend the next hours talking to Jason. About everything and nothing. Like they had done back then when they had still been two average people.

Sadly that wasn’t going to happen.

Jason came back, handed Stephen his glass and sat down at the far end of the couch. “You didn’t look as surprised as you should have.”

“Neither did you.”

He only got a shrug in response and Jason stubbornly looked past Stephen. Fine, then it had to be him who got the conversation started. “Something like happened before, right?”

“Yes...” Jason mumbled softly and rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes. “I ruined my entire living room.”

“How?”

Raising his head Jason sent him a bitter smile. “I came home after I heard that you were gone. Without a word. Apartment sold. Left the city. Gone. I was furious. I swiped a magazine off the table with my hand and then all the bookshelves came off the walls. I had no idea how I did it, but I could feel that it was me.”

Those bookshelves were definitely heavier than the bike. How much training would he have needed to do that?

“Did anything else like that happen?”

“Why? Why do you suddenly care about that? I am not like everybody else. Like I told you and instead of losing your mind, you are sitting here and want to know more about how... I don’t know. What the hell have you been doing the last year?!?”

So Stephen told his story a second time. With a lot more details.

This time Jason remained silent the entire time and Stephen expected him to demand proof. To show him any kind of magic, but Jason merely looked at him with his curious eyes. “Do you know who I am?”

Naturally it was the one question that he needed to ask and yet Stephen felt a little sting in his chest. Why? What else was there to talk about between them? They had broken up one year ago. Nothing that Stephen had done since then had any meaning for their relationship.

Jason still didn’t know who he was. Stephen didn’t know either, but there might be implications that Jason probably couldn’t even imagine.

“No, but there is chance for us to find out. Whatever skill you have… you must have acquired it somewhere. If we knew what you can do…” Stephen trailed off, rather confused when Jason stood up and took Stephen’s glass right out of his hand. “What are you…”

The words died on Stephen’s lips as he got to witness something that nobody at the Kamar-Taj had been able to do. A manipulation of the elements. Again without the help of an object. The water inside of Stephen’s glass turned to ice and there could be no doubt that this was Jason’s doing. His fingertips were blue. The entire process only lasted seconds, then Jason put the glass on the couch table, his fingertips instantly returned to their usual colour.

“I can do this.” He said matter-of-factly as if it was the most normal thing to him. “What happened half an hour before… I can’t control that. It happened only twice and I have no idea how. I can control that.” Jason gestured at the glass. “Kind of explains why I never feel cold.”

Stephen had to admit that the ability to talk had left him at this moment.

“He can manipulate matter.” Stephen was hiding his face behind his hands, repeating those words helplessly. It had cost all his strength to not show Jason how much this ability had upset him. Or was ‘scared’ the better expression? To be honest, Stephen had no idea. He couldn’t stop thinking about this single piece of information. “Please tell me that a lot of people can do that. That I am just terribly misinformed.”

“Hardly anyone can do that.” Wong replied drily. “At least not without the help of…”

“No magical objects, nothing. That was only him.” Stephen shook his head, feeling strangely sick.

“It’s a skill that is almost impossible to learn. It usually takes millennia.”

Stephen’s head flung up. “Are you trying to tell me that he is a thousand years old?”

Wong shook his head. “Not necessarily. He could have been born with it. That would mean though that he is definitely not human.”

“What I really want to know is… Jason still has no idea who he is or what he can do. He discovered two of these abilities by accident. He didn’t lift a pen, but trashed his living room. He turned water into ice like it was nothing. He didn’t even have to concentrate… if all of this comes so naturally to him… how powerful is he actually?”

Wong didn’t reply, because they both already knew the answer and Stephen just wanted to forget about all of this, since there weren’t many scenarios that could explain what such a powerful entity had to do with the invasion.

Fire and ice

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

We're rushing towards the end, so here we go :)

A one hour speech should be enough for the cloak of levitation to make him not move during the entire afternoon. Right? By now Stephen should be used to being constantly nervous. Nevertheless he was shifting from one foot to the other, unable to sit down or do pretty much anything. Only five more minutes before Jason was supposed to show up and Stephen had the definite feeling that he was going to be punctual this time.

Jason was going to be here. In the Sanctum Sanctorum and Stephen was already a complete wreck. It was a strange, almost toxic mixture. Normal excitement and nervousness about seeing Jason and then actual fear of what they could find out today. About Jason.

Luckily there was no more time to ponder all the possibilities. The doorbell was ringing and Stephen sent the cloak another hard glance before rushing down the stairs. Stephen opened the door and there was Jason. For an embarrassing moment Stephen forgot how to breathe. That couldn't be a coincidence. Or could it? Had he ever told Jason that Stephen loved that dark blue sweater and the grey shirt beneath it? He definitely hoped so, because that would mean Jason was wearing it on purpose. For him. There was a good chance though that Stephen had never told him, it didn't sound like him.

"Hey." Jason mumbled softly, his arms loosely crossed in front of his chest. He looked like he had no idea what to do. But he was smiling and perhaps there was a chance for this to work out.

"Hello, come in." Stephen stepped aside and let Jason into the house.

One second later Stephen was already holding his breath, because he had no idea how Jason would react to this entirely new environment. First of all Jason was only looking around, clear curiosity on his face and Stephen instantly had the urge to say something. "Do you want a cup of tea?"

"Yes, please."

So Stephen led him further into his new home and of course Jason stopped in the big library, eyes scanning the titles of the books. Could he read all of them? Even the ones that had been written in another world or dimension? Releasing a long breath Stephen tried to rid himself of the thought and instead left to get them tea. When he came back Jason was scanning through a book about astral projection. Stephen's stomach might be revolting by the end of the day. Jason slowly put the book back in its place and took his cup, muttering the words 'Thank you'. It was an awkward moment since Stephen made sure that their hands wouldn't brush. He was afraid that he might feel that untamed and closed off magic again... and the consequences.

"What's the verdict? You've been checking the place out..."

Jason shrugged and continued to look around. "It's... weird."

“Yeah, I know.”

“No, you don’t.” Jason shook his head and licked his lips. Definitely subconsciously. “I like it. Very much so. It feels... familiar. It’s weird because it’s your place. None of this has anything to do with you.”

Now Stephen was the one who shrugged. “Things change, but I guess I know what you mean. I had a lot of trouble... coming to terms with all of this. Understanding it. What do you mean when you say that... this feels familiar? You haven’t been here before, right?”

“Not familiar in that way... More like... I think that... I see these things for the first time and I still think that...” Jason awkwardly cleared his throat. “The book about astral projection sounds like something I’ve heard before or something I could have read. I don’t know. This whole place... feels nice.”

Immense power. Can change matter. Is able to conjure magic with minimal gestures. Stephen couldn’t shake off that knowledge. Who knew how many books Jason had already read in his life? How many abilities he had learned? To how many places he had gone?

And who had hurt him so badly that Jason had forgotten all about it?

“It feels nice and it hasn’t anything to do with me.”

Stephen winced although it had been himself who had said those words. How was it possible to voice a thought that he didn’t know he had had? Jason’s smile faded and once more Stephen had made it to feel him uncomfortable. “That’s not what I meant.”

Good, after all this was not what his visit was about.

“How did you mean it?”

Why couldn’t Stephen just shut up?

Frustration was creeping up on Jason, Stephen could see it and he hated himself. “All the time we’ve been together you were that horribly logical and by the numbers doctor. Which is okay, I liked that guy very much, he was awesome. But you rolled your eyes at everything that was just slightly spiritual or something that couldn’t be explained by physics. You being here and being... what did you call it? A master of the mystic arts? It’s strange.”

Good, Stephen could deal with that. “Alright, me being part of this is weird, I get that. What about you? Don’t you feel like you have to freak out about... the things you can do?”

Now Jason was frowning, but when he shook his head it looked completely natural. “No... I don’t know if you remember, but I wasn’t the one who was sceptical about the idea of being... different. You were the one who rejected the idea.”

Stephen’s mouth felt strangely dry and he had to clear his throat. “I know, but... I didn’t expect you to be so at ease with this. It’s not something that...”

Jason didn’t let him finish. “My life only consists of my four years. During those four years pretty much everything felt completely new to me. Everything. Driving a car. Shopping groceries. Voting. The concepts weren’t totally foreign, but... nevertheless new. I’ve had the idea that I came with the invasion way before I’ve told you about it. I’ve played the thought for a very long time that I am not human. It’s not upsetting. It’s... reassuring.”

“We don’t know any of that for sure.”

With a half-smile on his lips Jason shook his head. “Oh, I know, Stephen. I know.”

A cold shudder was running down his spine. “Do you remember something?”

“No, I found out. You were gone for a year, Stephen. Lots of things can happen in one year.”

The reproach wasn’t even hidden and Stephen’s thoughts went into an entirely new direction. Yes, a lot of things could happen. Had somebody else happened? Had there been somebody else in Jason’s life after Stephen had left it? None of that should matter right now. “It’s still incredibly annoying that you won’t give a concrete answer to a rather simple question.”

Instead of answering Jason put down his cup of tea and rolled up the sleeve of his sweater. “Do you see anything?”

“No. What am I supposed to see?”

“About six months ago I realised that you had been completely wrong about the story that I had told you. About the gym and how I had thought that I was stronger than the average person. I tried a few things, but to cut a long story short... I can lift a car. With my hands. Then I... I thought about how nobody could explain how my injuries healed. How I never even felt sick for a single minute. I cut myself. Just a scratch to see. It disappeared within an hour. So I did it again. To spare you the details... There should be a very long and very ugly scar. There isn’t and I know very well now how every single bone in my body could have been broken without any long term consequences. I heal very fast. Do you do that too? Or anyone else that you met while you were gone?” Jason’s voice had dropped to a whisper and Stephen could merely shake his head. He thought of the Ancient One and how she had died. Not through magic, but through a fall. Broken bones.

She had been a human being after all. Blessed with immense power, but at the end of the day merely flesh and blood.

Not Jason though.

“Jay, I don’t know where you came from or... who you really are.”

“Can we find out?”

“Do you want that? And if we find out where you come from... would you want to go back there?”

Jason’s teeth scrapped over his lower lip and he exhaled loudly. “I don’t know what will happen or what I will want. Right now I just want to know.”

Stephen was feeling sick and he asked himself how much he could even tell Jason. That all these hints about his power were scaring him? That Jason was nothing at all like anything he had learned about at the Kamar-Taj.

But then he was still Jason. The guy Stephen had fallen for so desperately. Jason who hummed Queen songs in the shower. Who rolled his eyes at people who didn’t understand political satire. Who liked to hold a book in one hand and trail the fingers of his other one down Stephen’s back. Jason who wouldn’t grant Stephen a single word of encouragement before an important operation, but then, right before Stephen would leave the apartment, Jason would grab him and press a gentle kiss to his temple. A gesture of such tenderness that it left no room for doubt. That was Jason.

“Okay...” Stephen nodded breathlessly. “This library is more or less filled with endless knowledge. We should find something here. We should... look for something about turning water into ice. That’s something hardly anyone can do.”

A very familiar smirk appeared on Jason’s lips. “Does that mean I am special?”

“Just get a book and start searching.”

For that short moment Stephen let himself believe that everything could just go back to normal. That they could figure it out. Then silence settled in and Stephen wasn’t so sure anymore. Was the situation awkward for both of them or only for him? Ever so often he glanced over the edge of his book to watch Jason who was turning pages with an unnatural speed. The setting was only made worse by the fact that Stephen didn’t care about what they might find.

After half an hour Stephen’s force crumbled completely and he needed to start a conversation. “Apart from... all of this... how was the last year for you?”

As soon as the words had been said out loud Stephen wished that he could take them back. Jason didn’t even look up, but he snorted. “Ah, now you care?”

Great, so it had taken Stephen less than a minute to destroy all the goodwill that he had earned back. The fact that Jason could hold onto a grudge forever also didn’t play into his hands. The worst thing Stephen could do was to give in, because Jason was never going to let it go then. Sure, he had every right to be mad, but after some time it got impossible to talk to him. “I’ve already apologized and I meant it. I just want to... I know you were doing fine. You are right, you’ve never needed me to do okay. What were you doing during the last 12 months?”

Not deigning him worth of a single glance Jason shrugged. “I moved. I went to work. I got a new haircut. I visited France. I went on a few dates.”

Stephen was proud of himself for resisting the urge for ball his hands into fists, but he didn’t ignore the provocation. “Anyone worthwhile?”

“Yes. Frank. Very pleasant guy. Knew how to make me laugh. It didn’t work out though and we stopped seeing each other. After talking to each other about first and saying goodbye. You know, like decent people do.”

Sighing deeply Stephen muttered another “I know, I am sorry” before concentrating back on the book. All different types of magic were listed on these pages, descriptions of beings that even Stephen could only dream of. Still, nothing seemed to have anything to do with Jason. They continued like that for another hour, then Jason seemingly had enough. “I am not an expert, but is this really effective? We’re looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“That’s what academic work looks like. Lots of books and a lot of time.”

“That’s not the right way to do it.”

“You just said it yourself, you are not the expert.”

“And yet I know that this isn’t effective.” Growling softly Jason stood up, leaving the book on the table.

That behaviour didn’t surprise Stephen, Jason could be a patient person, but at some point he got frustrated and then it was Stephen who needed a lot of patience. “Okay, then make another suggestion.”

Jason shrugged helplessly. "That is exactly what is driving me crazy. I know that this isn't the way to go, but I don't know what the right way either..."

Putting his own book away Stephen felt a little lump in his throat. Combined with the desire to make Jason feel better about the situation. Stephen had no idea how to do that. It wasn't necessary anyway since Jason abruptly changed the topic. "Can you give me the tour? Around the house?"

"Yes, sure."

An awkward tour. At least for Stephen. It was scary how unfazed Jason was by all the magical artefacts. By the magic itself that was running through the building. Jason moved around so easily compared to how Stephen had acted the first time he had been here. The only emotion on Jason's face was curiosity.

Then there was the cloak of levitation and Stephen's one hour speech hadn't had any effect. It seemed to raise its head at Jason and Stephen instantly hissed "Don't!"

For the first time Jason moved back, a bit irritated. "This... is a cloak and it's looking at me."

"Yeah, it's not supposed to do that."

Jason made a sound that half amused and then held out his hand. Completely unafraid. "It's beautiful..."

Stephen held his breath when the cloak moved closer and eventually wrapped itself around Jason's fingers. As if it was trying to shake his hand. Fascinated Stephen watched the scene developing in front of him. Sure, the cloak was anything but shy, but Stephen hadn't seen a confrontation like this before. The cloak being curious about someone. His eyes then travelled to Jason's face and what he saw there had him holding his breath. During their relationship Stephen had thought that he had come to learn all of Jason's expressions. There had been annoyance, passion, anger, impatience, amusement and pretty much every emotion a human being was capable of. Only now Stephen realised that there was one thing that Stephen had never seen. Wonder. Astonishment.

The entire time there had never been anything that had been enough to amaze Jason. Although he found joy in a lot of things Jason had never been impressed by anything. Until now. Jason's eyes were larger than usual and they were bright. Beautiful and full of curiosity.

"Jay?"

"It's old." Jason mumbled softly before pulling back his hand. "But it's not as old as me."

A wave of nausea threatened to overcome Stephen. "Jason... the cloak of levitation is centuries old."

"I know."

"How?"

"I can feel it." Jason stated simply and Stephen knew that he couldn't continue trying to ignore the obvious. First of all, Jason most probably wasn't a human being. Second, he was indeed much older than 30 years. Third, despite not knowing anything about his own power, Jason could be yielding so much more of it than Stephen. Forth, neither of them knew anything about Jason's intentions. Before all of this.

"Aren't you scared?"

Jason answered by shaking his head. "No. This is all too familiar to feel afraid. Are you?"

Was he making fun of him? Both of them could probably hear Stephen's heart racing in his chest. How could he be the one shaking and Jason was completely at ease? Despite growing so much during the last year and learning so much about himself and the entire universe... Stephen still felt completely unable to admit having or showing weakness in front of Jason. Not him.

"Can you... give me your hand?"

Both of Jason's eyebrows went up and Stephen instantly needed to explain. "In front of your apartment... when I grabbed your wrist. I felt something."

Jason sent him an amused gaze and Stephen felt his cheeks heating up. Damn, he was too old to blush. "No, I didn't mean... that. Magic. I felt your magic. Perhaps it'll help."

Seemingly a bit confused Jason turned to him and then, without further ado, he grabbed Stephen's hand. Then the world stopped and fell apart. Another one opened up. Not one, thousands. Jason's magic was everywhere and everything. It was oozing power and knowledge. Stephen could feel it running over his skin, slipping inside and he even thought he could taste it. Earth and winds. It was an endless ocean and the more Stephen tried to concentrate on it, the more he feared to get lost in it. Like a wave that would take him away until the shore was only a distant memory. Almost like his first encounter with the Ancient One. Only now Stephen knew what he was doing and nonetheless he was completely overwhelmed by this entirely new feeling. A burst of colours, too bright and too dark at the same time. Too much to take. So far away from everything that Stephen knew.

A bit too quickly Stephen let go again. Right now the fact that he had kissed this man, touched his entire body seemed completely impossible. The magic had been there all the time and Stephen hadn't felt it, hadn't noticed it. How could Jason even live with all that power inside of him without being aware of it?

Green eyes filled with curiosity looked at Stephen and he desperately tried to keep his expression calm, to not let Jason see how mere skin contact was putting him on the edge of losing his mind. Not knowing how to handle that amount and especially that kind of power. Something so raw and unknown.

"So? Any new insights?" Jason tilted his head and showed off a little teasing smile. As if he knew that Stephen was dealing with something that he couldn't comprehend.

"No." Stephen lied and shook his head to emphasize.

Humming softly Jason shrugged, he was still smiling and Stephen wanted to call this off. Forget about their search and instead take Jason out like he had used to. Who cared about magic and supernatural threats to the world? Stephen just wanted to go back to where they had been before his accident.

"A pity that you can't read minds. A little trip to my sub consciousness might clear things up..."

"Yes, probably..." Stephen mumbled absently before another thought came to his mind. "Did you feel something?"

Jason offered him a new smile, entirely without spite or menace. "I felt that you let me touch one of your hands for the first time after the accident."

What? A bit confused Stephen raised an eyebrow before it dawned on him. He had been ashamed

of his hands at the time, they had been useless to him and the last person who should ever see that had been Jason. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know, but that’s what I felt.”

“Perhaps you should grow accustomed to the idea of never finding out about his identity.” Wong chose his words carefully, but Stephen wasn’t even listening. His mind was still occupied going over the events of the day over and over again.

Having Jason moving casually around the house, talking to him about magic and everyday things. Stephen had enjoyed it way too much and the afternoon had dragged an already old realization back to the surface. Although Stephen couldn’t pretend that he wanted every single aspect of his old life back, he definitely wished for Jason’s presence. For his smiles, teasing comments and his mean-spirited ideas. Given the warmth that Jason had shown him today Stephen felt like this possibility was in his reach. All he had to do was to open his mouth and tell Jason. Then maybe Stephen could have him back.

It sounded so simple and at the same time it couldn’t be more complicated.

“Unfortunately that is not an option.” Stephen muttered absently, still staring into the space. Hoping that the solution to his dilemma would suddenly jump at him out of the blue.

“What do you mean?” It was Wong’s gentle tone that made Stephen realise that he was having a conversation with a friend. Not just a colleague. At another time that knowledge would have filled Stephen with happiness, but right now his entire being was focused on very small set of emotions. None of those had to do with happiness.

Still refusing to look at Wong, because Stephen was afraid of what the other man might see, he told him about what had happened a few hours ago. “Since we weren’t able to find anything in the books... I wanted to recreate what happened when I first saw him again. I touched his hand and...” For a short moment Stephen had to stop to call back the intense memories which instantly threatened to get too much. “This time I concentrated on his... I’ve never experienced something like this before, Wong. Not even with the Ancient One. Jason’s magic... it’s old. It’s fire and ice at the same time. I wasn’t able to locate its beginning nor its end. He is magic, all of him. I was afraid to drown in it, that it would swallow me whole. It’s not just there... it’s a storm roaring inside of him. The Ancient One must have been talking about him when she mentioned a magical force that arrived with the invasion. Given the sheer power that he must possess... what are the chances that he came without intent?”

No, Stephen still wasn’t going to look Wong, it had taken enough of his strength to voice his thoughts.

“You believe that Jason was an ally of the Chitauri?”

Why did it always make such a difference to say things out loud? Why did that make them real? “A powerful magical entity arrived at the same time as them... The Tesseract opened the door for them. How many people on this planet would have been able to do that?”

“Hardly anyone.”

Exactly. Stephen closed his eyes, thinking back to how Jason and him had celebrated Christmas. By not celebrating it at all, but flying to the Seychelles. Both of them didn’t really like snow,

Stephen didn't believe in god and for some reason Jason had always been convinced that he wasn't Christian. There had been presents anyway.

"Damn it..."

"Or he could have been fighting against them. He was hurt after all."

An idea that Stephen fiercely wanted to believe him. "It has to be one of those two options."

"The Avengers would know. If he was the one to open the portal, they would know." Wong pointed out another fact and it had Stephen laughing. Bitterly. "I am not going to contact the Avengers. Magic isn't their responsibility and... Jason has no memory of what he might have done. I am not going to attract the attention of people who might remember another version of him. No, that is not an option."

"Then you are deciding for him that there is no way to find out who he is?" An unhidden reproach and Stephen shook his head. "There is a way to find out. A way to find out right now."

Wong followed Stephen's gaze and then both of them were looking at the eye of agamotto.

"You have no right to manipulate time for your personal use."

"It's not personal if Jason opened the portal. Then it's about the entire world." Also this way only Stephen would know the truth and then only he could decide what to do with that knowledge.

Loki

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

Here we go, last chapter. I hope you'll like it :)

“You cannot intervene. These are powers that cannot be messed with.”

Stephen sent Wong a gaze that said ‘I know’ before taking another deep breath. As much as he liked to put on the face of the sovereign sorcerer supreme, he wasn’t able to feign confidence now. He had no doubt that he was able to handle the eye of agamotto, but he was almost paralysed by the fear of what he might find.

Whatever had happened to Jason? Who was he? What had he done to end up in hospital that day?

“Are you sure that you want to do this?”

Wong looked so utterly worried that Stephen couldn’t stand the sight of him. So Stephen merely nodded concentrated on what he was going to do. For once his hands weren’t shaking as he opened the eye of agamotto and asked it to show him things that were long in the past. Closing his eyes Stephen fell into a tunnel of light and saw thousands of possible ways where he could go. A sheer endless number of events that had led up to this very moment.

Jason. Stephen had to find Jason.

Time was slipping through his fingers, running backwards and Stephen was looking around, still trying to find him. Stephen was standing in the middle of a street, he could see a man walking down the sidewalk. Jason had slightly longer hair, he looked in a hurry and Stephen wondered where he was going. It didn’t matter, Stephen had to go back further. Four years.

Stephen let go, felt time rushing by, so fast Stephen couldn’t see anything but blurred outlines. A little further to go, then the world around him settled back into its familiar shape. Looking around Stephen felt his throat constricting and a strong sickness spread inside of his stomach. No, not here. Stephen had been here before, but it wasn’t hard to identify this place. Concrete walls, monitors, armed men. A secret base and right in the middle of it the tesseract.

So this was where Jason’s past brought him? To a powerful artefact that had opened the portal for the Chitauri. Stephen closed his eyes, trying to come up with scenarios or ideas how this situation could turn out without Jason being associated to the alien race that had tried to conquer Earth. Nothing came up and time continued to pass, willing to show Stephen everything that he wanted to know. No interpretation or explanation necessary, Stephen was going to watch. Letting it play out in front of him.

That it did.

Only for a few fleeting seconds Stephen could feel offended by the people’s ignorance and stupidity for messing around with something way beyond their understanding. The tesseract quickly had them paying for it. Stephen passively watched as the cube came alive and panic spread

around the room. Rightly so. The first portal was being opened and unlike the agents Stephen didn't have to move back, because he wasn't living through this, he was merely watching. It gave him the opportunity to understand so much quicker what was going on.

The tesseract hadn't opened the door for an entire army. Not yet. Here was only one single man. Stephen's guts were twisting, a wave of nausea was threatening to come over him. Jason looked exactly like the very first time Stephen had seen him. Which meant horrible. Way too thin and pale. Dark rings underneath his eyes which were a testament to a severe lack of sleep. Stephen wasn't unfamiliar with this picture although it had become a very distant memory. Jason's attire was the deeply unsettling thing though. Metal and leather, a type of armour that had nothing to do with the casual and still elegant clothes that Jason usually liked to wear. He looked ready to go to war.

Stephen was shocked by the deranged grin on Jason's face, but time didn't have pity on him, it kept on running and revealed all the things that Stephen had never wanted to see.

"Sir, please put down the spear."

It wasn't a spear, but a threateningly powerful sceptre and Jason didn't put it down. Stephen watched in silent horror how Jason put unfamiliar fighting skills on display. None of it was self-defence. The aggressor in this situation was Jason and he didn't attack to incapacitate. His fighting style was a mixture of physicality and magic. Small force fields that he could conjure at any time to protect himself from the bullets which were bouncing off him. Two daggers were flying across the room, burying themselves in the throats of two agents with fierce precision. Energy blasts being fired from the sceptre and Stephen could feel that their impact was fatal. Within ten mere seconds Jason had killed five people without even pronouncing a word.

Now Stephen had seen it and there was no way to un-know something. To forget what he had seen here. Like Jason had done. No. Not Jason.

"I am Loki of Asgard and I am burdened with glorious purpose."

Loki. Jason's name was Loki. He was Asgardian. Probably indeed thousands of years old.

"Loki? Brother of Thor."

The situation escalated further and Stephen watched the events unfolding, wishing that he would become numb, that he might be able to look Jason's atrocities as if he was anybody else. Somebody who Stephen hadn't held in his arms. Somebody who hadn't sat next to Stephen's hospital bed and waited for him to wake up.

The story continued though, unstoppable. Stephen became witness to Jason destroying the entire base, killing everybody inside of it. Then sending even more people to their deaths while preparing the actual invasion. Jason opened the gate for them. Not with his own hands, but it had still been him.

Then again, not really. Stephen could hear him talk to some other entity, probably by using the sceptre. A one-sided conversation, but enough information was gained to know that Jason hadn't orchestrated the invasion. He had been taking orders. In the end that didn't matter much since Stephen had seen his spite and his malice, his willingness to kill and the contempt that he had for his brother.

A brother. Jason had a brother. No, Loki had a brother. Loki was Jason's real name.

By the end Stephen even got to see how the man who led the invasion forgot everything about himself. Stephen watched with pain as the Hulk tossed Loki around and suddenly he knew how every bone in his body had been broken. Unconscious Loki lay on the edge of the platform of the tower. After another attack of one of the big Chitauri a large part of the platform collapsed and Stephen saw Loki falling before being buried by debris. That was it. Three days later he was found and pulled out by first responders.

For Stephen time had stopped a while ago and even after he broke the connection to the eye of Agamotto, he wasn't able to tell where he was. His head was empty, every thought and every emotion had been robbed from him. All he could think about was that one expression Loki's face. The madness and the anger. Then so much more.

“Did you mourn?”

“There are no men like me.”

“An ant has no quarrel with a boot.”

Running both hands through his hair Stephen shook his head, trying to shake it off. To be able to start thinking about it. To analyse and to come to a logical conclusion. Nothing. There was only the feeling of having a hole ripped into him.

“Stephen? What did you see?”

Wong was still here and of course he could see that absolutely everything was wrong with Stephen. No, he hadn't even planned to lie and there would have been no point in it anyway. It was more than visible that Stephen had seen the horror. Therefore Stephen told him. All of it. Every horrid detail about what he had come to know. It didn't change anything. After so much time Stephen actively noticed how much his hands were shaking and he was sure that it had nothing to do with the accident.

At least Wong granted him a few moments of silence, because answering any question would have been overwhelming. How could a story make sense and be impossible at the same time? Stephen had seen Loki, who he was and what he had done. He knew that Loki was powerful and capable, but at the same time it was Jason.

“What are you going to do now?”

Stephen's fingers were hovering over the bell and after an entire minute he still didn't find the strength inside himself to just ring it. Why? He had travelled to another dimension, he had died, he had manipulated time and now Stephen couldn't bear to thought to face a person he had seen every single day only one year ago. Even if Stephen knew the truth now, it didn't change anything at the moment. Because Loki didn't know. Loki had no idea about being a powerful demi-god and being the leader of the Chitauri invasion. He wasn't going to turn around and ram a knife into Stephen's back. Jason had no reason to do so.

But he wasn't Jason.

Although the prospect was tempting Stephen couldn't stay in front of the door for the rest of his life. While exhaling loudly Stephen knocked at the door and then he had to wait. It didn't take long for Loki to open the door and a smile appeared on his lips. A beautiful, gentle smile. Completely unlike everything Stephen had seen through the eye of Agamotto. Jason had smiled a lot.

“Hey...” He sounded pleasantly surprised and Stephen felt like he had punched him in the stomach. “Now that’s a surprise. Come in.” Loki stepped aside and Stephen entered the apartment. “I am not... coming at a bad time?”

Stephen wanted him to say yes. Give him a reason to just leave.

“No, I just finished translating a few files and I was getting ready to go shopping for groceries, but that can wait another 30 minutes. Do you want something to drink?”

He had a job. He was living a completely normal life.

“Yes, please...”

With a quick nod Loki disappeared in the kitchen and Stephen wanted to jump out of the window. There was nothing different about him, he was talking and acting the same way. Because all of this was real. Another life and unlike Stephen Loki had no idea what had happened before this one.

“Here.” Loki was already back and handed Stephen a glass of orange juice. Because he knew that Stephen liked it.

“Thank you.” Stephen was hoarse, he had to clear his throat and Loki was looking at him with unhidden curiosity. “So? What do I owe the pleasure of your visit? Did you find out something new?”

“*What are you going to do now?*”

“*I don’t know. He is... He wasn’t part of the invasion. He brought the invasion. How am I supposed to tell him that?*”

“*I am more worried about what is going to happen after you told him. He tried to enslave the entire planet. There have to be consequences.*”

“*Do there have to be?*”

“*Stephen, what are you trying to say?*”

“*Jason didn’t do anything. That was Loki.*”

“*They are the same person.*”

“*So am I supposed to fight or punish a person who doesn’t remember the bad things they have done and who haven’t done anything even remotely criminal since? He doesn’t remember!*”

“*But one day he might.*”

Stephen stared at him, his mind once again wiped clean and Loki immediately noticed that something was wrong. Of course he did. They knew each other. They had lived together. Loki had given a damned scalp massage when the migraine had been hitting him hard. Loki knew him and Stephen couldn’t stand in front of him, not knowing what to say. How long would it take him to realise what exactly was going on in Stephen’s head? He had always been very good at sensing Stephen’s fear, especially when he had been trying to hide it.

“I think...”

“Doctor Strange, what is going on?” There was a little teasing smile on Loki’s lips, but Stephen could already see in his eyes that he had raised his suspicions.

Yes, what exactly was going on? When Stephen looked at the man in front of him, he couldn't see the maniac killer who had come to this world a few years ago. This was Jason. Who was even more organised than Stephen and then suddenly decided that he enjoyed chaos much more than order. Who would bury himself under a thick, cosy blanket in front of the TV at night and would step Stephen so long with his foot until the later one would get up and bring him whatever he wanted from the kitchen.

“I was wondering...” Stephen liked his lips and since he couldn't look at Loki, he looked everywhere else. At the bookshelves, the pictures of scenery on the walls, a half empty cup of coffee on the desk and another thousand things that Stephen had already seen before and that were so definitely Jason.

“I saw what happened to him. I saw the trauma that... He hasn't remembered in over four years. Medically there isn't a big chance that he is ever going to remember.”

“Him not remembering the past doesn't mean the past didn't happen.”

“I know that! But nobody but the two of us knows! Not even himself!”

“The Avengers know.”

“I don't care about the Avengers.”

“He has a brother. He is part of them.”

“I...”

“Is it fair that he probably thinks that his brother is dead?”

“Jason doesn't remember him and if he did... What would be the point in knowing? There are parts of the Avengers who would want him to suffer and Thor... he would bring him back to Asgard to face justice and Jason still wouldn't remember!”

“That is not his name.”

“It's the only name he knows.”

Loki was tilting his head, still frowning at Stephen who was completely lost. If Stephen had thought that seeing him was going to make anything easier, he had been so completely wrong. Wong was right, there was no denying of what Loki had done, but whatever had made him actually want to do these things... it was gone. This wasn't some criminal who was honestly regretting what he had done and who was looking for redemption. There was no redemption necessary since there was no knowledge of any crime ever being committed. No motivation to commit one.

“I can't remember you ever being silent for such a long amount of time. You mind telling me what's going on?”

Stephen had no idea what was going on. Every single shade of this situation was overwhelming him. Shouldn't it be clear what to do? The man in front of him had done atrocious things and he should finally be held accountable. But the mind of the man who had declared war on earth had disappeared four years ago. All that was left was a feisty, charming man who had no connection whatsoever to his own past... and who still possessed the same powers. Who could still decide to use them to whatever purpose. And he hadn't even found all of his powers yet.

A shudder was running down Stephen's spine, but when he looked at Loki he only saw those green

eyes that he had come to know so well. So easy to read, they had always been so expressive. They were worried. Stephen had had no idea what to do when he had come here and now he knew even less.

“I was thinking...” What was he supposed to say? Loki was looking at him expectantly, the smallest smile on his lips.

“Yes, that happens. Even to you.”

“Shut up.” Stephen released a shaky breath. “I was thinking... Do you remember that Italian place we went to one time? Where they messed up our orders and you got that amazing tiramisu while my pannacotta was just awful?”

A hearty laugh escaped Loki’s lips. “Sure, I do. The waiter gave me his phone number when you went to the bathroom.”

“What?” Stephen’s first instinct was to start complaining about the waiter’s boldness, but then he realized that it didn’t matter anymore. Their relationship had ended a long time ago, Stephen had no right to be jealous or to become possessive. Something that Loki had hated and loved at the same time.

Still amused Loki shrugged. “I didn’t call. Obviously. Yes, I definitely remember the place. Why?”

Stephen had no idea where he was going with this, he just wanted to do what felt right. “They are closing the place by the end of the week. I thought maybe you want to check it out one last time.”

Loki crossed his arms in front of his chest, he looked pleased but was trying not to show it too much. “Doctor Strange, are you asking me out for dinner?”

“Yes, I guess so. Are you saying yes?”

Loki’s entire face was lit up by a smile. One that Stephen had seen before. Many times. The man in front of him was happy, at ease, free from worry and dark thoughts. Very unlike the one Stephen had seen through the eye of agamotto. Those two had nothing to do with each other. This was Jason. Happy, sane and impertinent. Stephen had missed him fiercely.

“Yes. Tomorrow?”

Shaking his head Stephen took a step closer to him. “How about tonight?”

“Yes, I’d like that too.”

Now Jason wasn’t the only one smiling and Stephen raised his hand to touch his cheek. Once more Stephen felt the storm beneath Jason’s skin, the tingles and sparks of raw magic running through his veins. There was no time to fall into it or to get overwhelmed, because Jason moved forward and gently pressed his mouth on Stephen’s. A pleasant sigh instantly passed Stephen’s lips and there was no denying in how much he had wanted this to happen again.

After a short and soft kiss Jason smiled, not even stepping back to bring distance between them. He remained exactly where he was. Stephen could feel his breath on his face. “I am going to make you pay so much for leaving me alone for an entire year.”

“I am looking forward to it.”

Stephen’s fingers ran through Jason’s short hair, nuzzling his nose against his cheek. It wasn’t just

the familiarity of Jason's scent that finally made him relax. With one hand in his hair and an arm around his waist it was much easier to come to a decision. Stephen wouldn't hand him over to anyone. Jason had said it himself – there was nothing in his past for him to go back to. He had been absolutely right and Stephen wouldn't force him to even take a single step back.

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